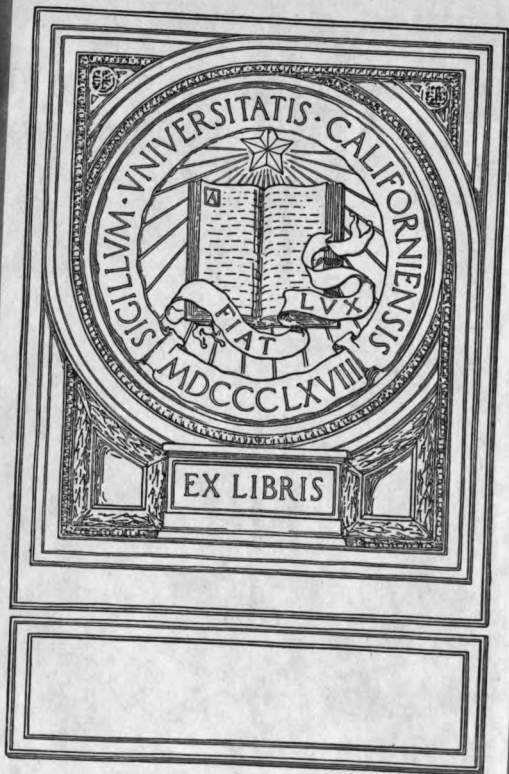

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The
SKY-
ROCKET
~
A New Novel

The SKYROCKET

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A New Novel by

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Adela Rogers St. Johns



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To
Ray Long

The SKYROCKET

CHAPTER I

SHARON KIMM came down the narrow dusty stairs that led from the rickety rooms where the bathing-beauties dressed. She came with a rush, skipping half the steps, to the accompaniment of the latest blues, whistled between small even white teeth.

Nobody had told Sharon Kimm that it wasn't lady-like to whistle. It would have made little difference if any one had. She whistled to keep up her courage. And for the last ten years her whistle had been rather overworked.

Once down, she didn't seem in such a hurry to cross the gravel path that led to the stage where the bathing-girls were working. She loitered, her eyes narrowing at the blaze of sunshine. And the sunshine caught in her hair—great thick waves of it, banded heavily about her head—and turned its deep bronze to a sheet of flame.

Beneath the gaudy black and white bathing-suit

the slim figure had still almost childish contours—undeveloped breasts, flat little waist that looked as if it would break in a man's hand, thin graceful arms. Her eyes, that were more gray than green and more green than blue, were almost black now, and they looked out upon the world with a wistful bravado.

A kitten ready to scratch or purr, according to its reception.

For in her heart, Sharon Kimm was a little afraid of what the day might bring forth. There had been a nameless, electrical threat of storm in the air yesterday, a coldly speculative glint in Mildred Rideout's eyes.

She was innocent. She *was*. Just the same, a nasty premonition told her that nobody in Hollywood was likely to believe it.

After all, why should they? Who was she, anyway? A comedy girl, and not such a very good one at that. An extra girl, at five dollars a day, struggling for the barest foothold.

And Mildred Rideout was a big star and an important one. If Mildred Rideout chose to believe that Sharon had tried to flirt with Aaron Savage or that he had cast a favorable eye upon her, there was nothing a mere Sharon Kimm could do to stop her. In a studio where intrigue and favoritism pulled the wires that made the marionettes dance, no one was apt to side with Sharon Kimm against a star, particularly a star who happened also to be the Boss's sweetheart.

With a shrug, she drifted over to the big set, already humming like a beehive beneath the glare of the kleig-lights. She kept a wary eye on the scene, in-

wardly fighting for poise, outwardly as cool and impudent as a flapper.

But nothing had happened apparently. Everything was just as usual. The girls cluttered about, giggling in corners, beautiful and naked as nymphs in a woodland glade. The electricians sweated and swore and stamped in and out, ignoring them as utterly as though they had been part of the flimsy scenery. Cameramen strolled about, disdainful and leisurely, waiting for the endless preparations of lights and sets to be completed.

Sharon Kimm strolled over and reported to the assistant director. His name was Johnny. He had been very kind to her ever since she came on the Savage lot, and the assistant director could make it either very tough or very easy for an extra girl. He seemed to sense some of the shyness beneath Sharon's hard impertinence. This morning the sight of his fat round face, already beginning to take on its look of perpetual worry, brought her a feeling of relief. It was like awakening to the familiar face of the alarm clock after a nightmare.

"Good morning, bright eyes," said Johnny with his wide grin. "How did you sleep?"

"Alone," said Sharon, pertly, narrowing her eyes at him. "I always do. I'm narrow-minded that way."

"I recognize you now," said Johnny, still grinning. "You were the other girl in the virgins' parade they had down to Venice last Easter."

"Wasn't you taught in school not to talk about things you don't know nothing about?" said Sharon, shimmying her shoulders at him. "Now I——"

It was then that the voice cut through, silken, knife-edged with laughter, glinting with friendly mockery.

Sharon took one long silent breath and turned. But Mildred Rideout was not looking at her. Had not spoken to her. She was looking at Johnny and she was smiling.

"How'd she get in, Johnny?" said Mildred Rideout, flicking the tail of that smile across Sharon Kimm, "You want to be careful. I hear she's getting pretty dangerous. Maybe we better not have her around this lot any more for a while."

Sharon's round little chin went up. So that was it. Mildred intended to take this thing seriously, to strike, but to strike under cover. Her eyelids flickered, but she kept silent. Johnny stood, looking from one to the other of the two women—first at the star, very smartly clad, very cool, a little dry flame burning her cheeks—then at the slim girl in the black and white bathing-suit, her chin and eyebrows nicely indifferent in her white face.

Mildred Rideout went on playfully. "Yes, Johnny, I don't think your wife would feel safe if she knew you were around on the set with a dangerous girl like that. Some girls are all right. Maybe they don't brag about their virtue. Maybe they haven't got any to brag about. But they're on the level. They wouldn't start trying to double-cross somebody that had been decent to them, just for what they could get out of it. Others would. We don't want any girls like that around here, do we, Johnny?"

Johnny was acutely uncomfortable. It was all over his head. He didn't get it. Of course Mildred

was as jealous as a cat, always had been, but she'd always been just as friendly with Sharon Kimm as with any of the other girls. Maybe a little more so. Yes, she'd rather gone out of her way to be patronizingly kind to the new girl, and had been repaid by the kid's open adoration.

Now, all of a sudden, Mildred was putting on some kind of an act for the benefit of Sharon Kimm and of the listening company and of himself.

"Well," said Johnny, shuffling his feet, "I thought that——"

"Don't," said Mildred Rideout, with her dry laugh. "You aren't used to it, Johnny. I'll do all the thinking for this troupe. For instance, Johnny, I think a lot of girls come to Hollywood with the idea of vamping some big producer or director and getting to be a star that way. I think some of them haven't sense enough to know it's not done that way and that nine times out of ten they only make themselves silly. I think there are girls who are always going out of their way to make the boss notice them, hanging around his office, waiting around in the halls, trying to cut out his sweetheart or something. And I think girls like that should be stamped out——" She gulped down the last words, conscious that she had lost her playful pose.

Johnny wiped a stream of perspiration from his brow. It was making an old man of him before his time—handling these crazy girls, trying to keep peace. If there was a row on, why couldn't they put on the gloves and come out in the open and settle it, without this green-eyed, secret-vendetta stuff?

After a silence, Sharon Kimm said, "I—I haven't done anything to make you sore, have I, Mildred? I know I haven't done anything wrong. I swear I haven't."

It was all she could say. Her only defense was one she could not, would not offer.

Mildred Rideout had been nice to her. She had shown her little kindnesses on the set, had made her feel at home in a strange place.

It would be easier for Mildred to believe that Sharon Kimm had tried to vamp Aaron Savage for her own selfish ends, than to believe that the man had made all the advances. It wouldn't make Mildred any happier to know that Sharon had played a constant game of hide-and-seek, a rather clever game, with a man whom she loathed but whom Mildred Rideout happened to love.

Sharon Kimm had her own ideas of loyalty. They were primitive, but they were unshakable. They held her white and voiceless.

Besides, she knew something of jealousy and its blind harrowing madness. Mildred Rideout would believe what she chose to believe, would see distorted pictures because her brain was twisted by her passion.

Even in the face of Johnny's growing amazement, in the face of the hostility creeping into the eyes of all who watched her, in the face of this thing they must believe about her, Sharon felt that there was nothing more that she could say.

Long afterwards, when Sharon Kimm's name had blazed a trail of glory around the world and when

Mildred Rideout was almost forgotten, she did tell the truth of it all. For it did not matter to Mildred then, and Sharon cared to clear her own name of the accusation.

That morning, on the set, she just stood there, looking squarely into the angry smiling eyes above her.

"No, I don't suppose you've done anything," said the woman, "and I don't propose to give you a chance. I know your kind, my girl, and I can tell you you're wasting your talents around here. I'm almost sure you'll never really get anywhere if you stay on this lot. In fact, I'd swear to it. If I were you, I'd find some place where I could employ my talents to better advantage."

Anger flamed, too, in Sharon's odd long eyes. Her hands were hot with it. Her tongue was bitter with it. Her throat was crammed with things she longed to say. She was a fighter, was Sharon Kimm. Even losing her job, even being kicked to the foot of the hill when she had just begun to climb a little, didn't hurt as it hurt to stand before this crowd and take such a tongue-lashing.

But that was playing the game.

Without a word Sharon Kimm turned and went. In spite of the blazing sunshine, she could hardly see her way. But she went.

At least she could know in her own heart that her silence had paid any debt of gratitude she owed the woman who accused her.

CHAPTER II

LUCIA MORGAN was sitting by the one small window that gave upon a dilapidated back yard, when Sharon Kimm walked into the apartment they shared.

It wasn't much of an apartment. Lucia had done her best that very morning to make it shine a little, with that clean new look so dear to her heart, but without success. It just couldn't be done. There was something about the carpet, worn threadbare by many feet, and the tinted walls faded from pale blue to a nondescript gray, and the cheap Mission furniture, that defied her best efforts.

Oh, it was clean! The bathroom, with its two feet of floor space, and the tiny kitchen were spotless. But it all had a dingy look. There weren't many old apartments in Hollywood, of course. They'd only begun to build apartments in the last decade. So the few there were boasted low rents. And low rent was the only recommendation necessary for Lucia.

Sharon would have taken one of those shining new ones, and let the landlord worry about the rent, or moved on the first of every month the way some of the girls did. It had been reduced to a system by any number of extra girls.

But Lucia had put her foot down. She couldn't live that way. It would drive her crazy. And though

her soul yearned over a certain white-plaster bungalow court, she solaced it by promptly paid room rent and a sense of security. Their life was precarious enough at best without the added thorn of ejection.

As Sharon came in, her shoulders sagging under the cheap fur collar that ornamented her plush coat, her hat sidewise on the mass of her lovely hair, Lucia looked at her quickly, searchingly. Something was obviously wrong and sometimes it was difficult for Sharon to tell things.

As a matter of fact, Sharon never had to tell Lucia much. Lucia always knew, without forcing her to the effort of many words, when disaster had again overtaken Sharon. She had known ever since that night so long ago when they carried little Sharon Kimm to the Morgans' house and put her on Lucia's tumbled cot.

So she merely went on mending a pair of cheap silk stockings—Sharon's stockings—and waiting for details.

Sharon sat down in the one rocking-chair. "Well," she said blithely, bitterly, "I've lost my job."

Lucia wasn't altogether surprised. For several days she had rather expected something of the kind. Aaron Savage was a fool. Why had he made eyes at Sharon? Why couldn't he behave himself, knowing Mildred's disposition as well as he did?

Most of the men in Hollywood were all right. Lucia, who wanted to become a scenario writer, took dictation from a great author, a man with a bald head and several children to whom he was inexpressibly devoted. But Aaron Savage had invaded the

picture industry, had turned all his talents to becoming a successful producer, first because he desired to make money, but secondly because through it he found a happy hunting-ground for pretty women. Fortunately the type was rare.

Lucia looked across at the girl in the rocking-chair, who was so manifestly trying to keep up her courage with that jazzy whistle. She didn't understand about Sharon exactly. Lucia herself was smoothly blonde and softly blue-eyed and her skin was like the petal of a wild rose. A good many people thought her quite pretty. But she was never to be troubled with the things that followed Sharon, as flies follow a honey-pot.

She studied the deeply carved red of Sharon's small mouth. It reminded her of the round half-open mouth of a baby girl who has been eating cherries. The long eyes, more gray than green and more green than blue, rimmed with a velvety black circle. The level black brows and the straight black lashes, not long but very thick, and the short tip-tilted nose.

No, Lucia couldn't exactly understand the devastating effect of Sharon Kimm upon men. It had always been that way. And yet to the very end, at the height of her amazing popularity, up to the very moment of the crash, people could never agree about her beauty. There were always arguments as to whether she was beautiful at all. But, beautiful or not, she drew and held their eyes like a magnet, once she had been put in the proper setting.

Lucia saw that life wasn't going to be easy for Sharon Kimm, overshadowed as she was by her lack of confidence, her terrible clothes, her ignorance. It

wouldn't be easy anywhere, but in Hollywood, which is the melting-pot of a thousand kinds of genius, it was bound to be tempestuous, bound to be drama in the raw for Sharon Kimm, with that appeal lurking in every curve of her, and that heritage. Appeal was part of that heritage, of course, and hunger for beauty was part of it, and hatred of men was part of it, and even the wild extravagance that must have its desires at any cost.

For Lucia Morgan knew more of Sharon Kimm's heritage than any one else in Hollywood would ever know. She had known Sharon Kimm's mother and even when some people came to call Sharon the most beautiful woman in the world, Lucia knew that she was not and never would be as beautiful as her mother had been.

Sharon in sables and pearls, groomed by expert hands, set against the most perfect background artists could devise, was never so beautiful as Rose Kimm had been in her soiled, cheap finery, in the tiny dark house facing the railroad tracks.

The girl in the rocking-chair sat silent, her elbows on her knees, her eyes on the cheaply gilt buckles of her shoes.

And something in her attitude, something in her expression, reminded Lucia in vivid fashion of Sharon Kimm as she sat in the gutter by the railroad tracks on an afternoon over a dozen years ago, and of the strange events that followed.

The roadway that ran along beside the tracks was thick with dust, although it was the day before Christ-

mas. Everything was powdered a drab gray with it, and the low-hanging black clouds piled behind the packing-house held off their promise of rain. There was no moisture of any kind to keep the dust from sifting through the air in irritating, fine clouds.

Everything needed rain. Even the shop-girls felt that need in the big department stores where shoppers packed every aisle. The orgy of buying, of senseless, thoughtless, hectic buying, seemed to throb more intensely in the midst of the unseasonable heat.

Probably the only person entirely unaware of anything wrong with the weather was the little girl who sat on the curbstone, squashing the thick powdery dust between her little bare toes.

She was very dirty. Everything about her was dirty. The dress she wore had once been an unsuitable pink—cheap pink silk, it had been—but now it was grimy gray. Her skinny bare legs and her skinny bare arms gleamed whitely through streaks of grime. Only the great mass of raw-gold, bronze hair, that hung over her shoulders and sprayed into her face as she leaned down to watch her toes squashing in the dust, defied the general monotony.

Nobody came out to play with her. She looked about, secretly, with her narrow unchildish eyes, at the row of houses that turned unhappy faces upon the railroad track. There were children in all those houses and sometimes they came out to play with her. But not often. Oftener the girls slighted her, and said cruel, insolent things to her.

Sharon Kimm knew that she was not popular in the neighborhood. Her black level brows drew down

fiercely over the thought. Her mother wasn't popular either. The other women in the row never congregated on the Kimm front porch, or hung over the Kimm back fence. They wished, Sharon had heard them say, that the Kimms would move to some other neighborhood.

Instinctively and hotly, Sharon Kimm connected this ostracism—which she defied but which tore into her very heart—with the man in the blue suit and brass buttons, whom she hated.

She dug her little bare toes down deeper into the dust—so deep that it hurt the sensitive baby nails—but she didn't care. Nothing could make her cry. Hurting made her think how she would like to hurt the man in the blue suit. His name was Eddie. Her mother called him Eddie.

Sharon Kimm hated a good many things in her drab world, but most of all she hated Eddie.

Only that morning, when he had come to see mother, she had told him how she hated him, while mother protested, half angry, half laughing, in a piteous kind of way.

He was a slim dark smiling young man, with eyes that knew too much—eyes that said too much—eyes that assumed too much about every woman they fell upon. They were eyes that always brought a second look from women, even from the kind of women who are called ladies, when they got on his street-car and handed him nickels. And sometimes that second look was followed by an indignant flush, and sometimes by an answering smile. It all depended upon the woman.

He stood that morning in the bedroom door, watching Rose Kimm as she finished dressing. Sharon came

in from the back yard, with her noiseless, barefoot tread. She was only six, then, but just the same his eyes measured her, estimating the price-tag she would one day wear. Oddly enough, he had a hunch that it was to be a high one.

"Hello, kid!" he said, smiling at her and holding out his hand.

He had beautiful manners. Even the women in the row of houses that faced the track admitted that, when they discussed him—and Sharon's mother. Sharon's father had spoken of it, too. But then Sharon's father was a mild man, who had a bad habit of seeing only the best, where it was strictly necessary that he should see the worst before it was too late.

But Sharon did not know what nice manners were and they had no effect upon her. She looked at Eddie's outstretched hand and then she did an outrageous thing. She went over and spat on it with all the collected venom of an infant rattlesnake.

The man flushed darkly behind his eyes, but he did not say anything for a long moment. He was like that. Then, "I say, you little beast, I'd like to beat you. You need it."

His vanity writhed beneath her open hatred.

Sharon's eyes flamed green. "Yeh? An' you think you can do it? Yeh, yeh, you think you can do it, old mister smarty. I'll scratch your eyes out if you try it. I hate you. I wish you was dead."

She flew at him, her little nails unsheathed, her teeth bared, her small heels beating like machine-gun bullets.

Rose Kimm came quickly from the bedroom. It was not the first time Sharon had gone mad and assaulted Eddie. A superstitious fear seeped through the mist that wrapped Rose. Why did Sharon hate Eddie like that? Unless she *knew*. The child must know. And yet Rose believed that Sharon could know nothing. She was too young.

Sharon knew just one thing. Somehow, somewhere, in her heart she hid a wild headstrong pride. It was pride that made her ignore the girls who insulted her. It was pride that made her long to be loved and admired. And when this man looked at her mother, that pride groveled, as Rose Kimm groveled. Bred into the child was a sick fear of humiliation, perhaps gift of a father who had known little else, and she knew blindly the chains of humiliation under which her mother walked. They burdened her own small shoulders.

More she was indeed too young to realize.

Rose was not angry as she came out of the bedroom. Only she wondered why Sharon had picked this particular morning for one of her tantrums. The fierce little screams stirred anew the cold fear that clutched her heart.

Because, on that particular morning, Rose Kimm was laboring beneath the most shameful burden it is given woman to bear—the suspicion that her lover was growing tired of her, was untrue to her.

The guilty passion, to which she was a shameful slave, was graying to ashes. It took every lure of her looks to fan them to the faintest warmth.

Her looks! They called it “looks” down by the track, where beauty even as a word is almost unknown.

Looks were not a thing men of that neighborhood particularly desired in women belonging to them. Looks were dangerous. Women who had them got into trouble. More than that, they weren't satisfied to stay home and wash and mend and cook and scrub, grateful for a place to live and a husband to live with. No, they wanted to be hanging around in front of department-store windows, looking at swell dresses and fancy hats. They wanted other men's admiration. They were never satisfied.

Of course, looks didn't last long, as a rule. Even if a girl was pretty, when she was married, it took only a certain period of dish-washing and hard work, child-bearing and broken sleep, dust and dirt, to run her into the mold of drab middle age before her time.

That, by right, was what should have happened to Rose Kimm—to her flaming, golden-haired, black-eyed good looks. But it hadn't. She was made of different stuff. At twenty-five she was more magnificent than she had ever been.

It was her husband who had faded, grown oddly old, in those seven years. No wonder, though, at that. "Cap" Kimm had always been a poor sort of stick.

For young Eddie wasn't the first man to come to the Kimms' door in the daytime when Cap was at work.

A bad wife, and no man envied Cap, for all her splendor.

They didn't understand why he put up with her. They would not have understood, even if Cap had tried to tell them, which he couldn't have done to save his life. But Rosie was always kind to him, and she joked with him when he came home tired in the evening, and

she sat there smiling while he feasted his eyes upon her gardenia skin and her mass of golden hair, and her full-bosomed, curving figure. She was often good-natured and affectionate. Having once known her, Cap felt that half of her was better than all of some thin, colorless women. Sometimes he felt as though his life depended upon the rich warmth of her, as though it fed him. And little Sharon adored her.

Probably no one could deny that she was a bad mother. But she was a wonderful playmate. There was something of the child still strongly alive in her. Perhaps, except in that enticing body of hers, she had never grown beyond childhood. And she had a child's eager, reckless hunger for beauty.

Day after day, she and Sharon wandered the streets, staring wide-eyed at the fairy-land in the store windows. They had no money, but the windows were free to all. Sometimes they even invaded the stores themselves, and secretly touched the forbidden fruits.

Mrs. Deming, who lived next door to the Kimms, told rather amazing stories of Rose and her child.

"What they're up to I don't know," said she to her husband one night, as she placed the steaming platter of beef stew on the oilcloth. "I'm sure I don't. Today some of my clothes blowed off the line and I went next door in her back yard to get them. And I heard them laughing so in there, her and the brat, that I went and peeked through the kitchen window. And there was Sharon sitting up on the kitchen sink, with a red tablecloth wrapped around her, and some kind of a thing on her head made out of marigolds, that they must have stole out of my yard, and not a dish washed.

"What they were up to is beyond me. Some sort of play-acting, I suppose, along with the rest of her foolishness. Bringing up that child with her head full of nonsense. It's a crime. She'll come to a worse end than her mother."

But if Mrs. Deming could have peeped into the Kimm kitchen on certain other mornings, she might have viewed a very different scene—might have caught Rose Kimm in one of her hours of revolt against the hated squalor which she had not the strength either to conquer or to escape.

Her rage, like everything else about her, was slow, but when it came she stormed and raved, cursing the dingy house, and the dish-water, and the neighbor women in their wrappers and scraggly hair under soiled boudoir caps.

"You get out of it, somehow," she would say to Sharon, "anyhow. But get out of it. What's the use livin', if you've got to live like this?"

Oh, the lily that was Sharon Kimm and that was to know most of the glory and much of the sorrow of the world, had its roots deep in poverty and shame and violent passions!

But wherever she went, she carried with her that idealistic love for her mother which did not change even when she was old enough to know all that was hidden from her then.

And there were moments in her life when Sharon Kimm thought of poor, wicked, foolish Rose, and of the tinsel grandeur that cost her life, and dipped deeper into the riches at her feet with a pang that they had come too late to be shared with her mother.

She remembered her, in those later days, as she came out of the bedroom on that day before Christmas, wearing a dress of purple velvet that gave her black eyes a pansy sheen. Her eyes went swiftly to the smiling young man who held at arm's length a screaming, biting, clawing fragment of humanity. And they dropped, like a wounded bird, because of something they found—or perhaps did not find—in his face.

"Well, I must say, this is a nice, polite child you've brought up, Rosie," said the young man nastily. "It makes it pleasant for a guy to come around, don't it?"

"Sharon," said Rose, "please, honey. It makes mother—lots of trouble."

Instantly, the child was quiet. She backed away, her eyes still hard and dry. Neither tears nor laughter came easily to Sharon.

"All right," said Sharon, "I don't care. Only I hate him awful. I wish he was dead."

"Don't, baby," said Rose, trying to laugh that big, easy laugh of hers. "You're an awful bad little kid. You'd ought to be spanked, talking like that to grown-up folks. You got a nerve, all right. An' on the day before Christmas, too."

At that, Sharon began to grow a little white. Her eyes, as gray as the tracks that glistened dully under the gathering clouds, went very slowly, almost with awe, to a corner of the shabby room.

There, on a table, stood a small, gray-green tree. A cartoon of a Christmas tree it was. Bare. Skimp.

But it was a Christmas tree. Sharon's first. Her eyes on it, she drew a fearful breath. If anything should happen——

"What makes her hate me like that?" said Eddie, furious with smarting conceit. "My God! I ain't done anything to her, have I? What's she got it in for me so for?"

Rose's breast heaved under the tight dress. "She don't hate you, Eddie," she said, gently. "She's just making believe. Can't you take a joke, Eddie? Come here, honey. Come and tell Eddie you like him just fine."

Sharon came, dragging her feet, her eyes still on the tree, her lower lip caught back against her teeth. Rose knelt down. The man could see the top of her black velvet hat, where it was worn shiny, and the plumes were beginning to lie limp. Bedraggled ostrich plumes! Ugh!

"You want a nice Christmas tree, baby?" she said softly. "You want candles and shiny stuff, like the fairy princess wore where I took you down to the Fourth Street Store that day? You want maybe to have a dolly? Then you must be nice to folks. Come tell Eddie you like him all right."

It was many years before Sharon understood the fear and pain that ruled her mother then. It was almost the only thing that it was always hard for her to forgive.

She came and stood in front of the man, her skinny little body held rigid. Her eyes did not leave the bare tree in the corner, only now she saw it blazing, hung with dreams.

"I," she began in a thin, hard voice, then, "I can't, mama. I can't. It'll make me sick, mama." But even as she said it, some pleading in her mother's eyes

caught and drove her. "I like you fine, Eddie," she said, every word a curse, and ran into the back yard, and was very sick indeed.

She stayed hidden there until her mother and Eddie disappeared down the street in the direction of the car line.

"Ain't she a queer one?" said Rose, as they walked along, attempting to make light of the matter. "Sometimes I don't understand her myself. Sometimes I think she don't really care about nobody in the world but me."

"I guess I can stand it," said Eddie coldly. "There's plenty of women in the world don't belong to the Kimm family. What's the idea, going down-town this morning? You think I like to spend my time trailing around in this heat?"

"It's the day before Christmas," Rose explained, her hands on his coat sleeve. "Cap give me some money to get Christmas things for Sharon. He worked nights—that's what he's been working nights for. He earned extra. It's a big surprise to her."

The man, bored and angry, sneered at her. As she had no strength to resist his wooing, she had no coquetry, no dignity however poor, no variety of mood to keep him now that satiety was upon him.

"It's too bad he don't work a few nights and get money enough to buy you some new clothes," he said. "I'm ashamed to be seen on the street with you in them old rags."

Rose Kimm's eyes filled with tears. His words transformed that deadly fear into a deadly certainty. He was tired of her. And what could she do about it?

What could she do?

She had no hold upon him. He was free. Oh, God, what a fool a woman was to let a man get hold of her like that, when she'd no claim! It wasn't worth it. But it was too late for that now. If Eddie left her now, this dull ache would go on inside her forever, eating her up.

They got on a street car and sat down. Rose smoothed her velvet dress with unsteady fingers.

Instantly, all the eyes in the car were focused upon her. She sat, her face all soft and quivering, and tried to look as though nothing had happened. What a place to suffer—in a street car! The other people, complacent and quiet, had they, too, sorrows like hers gnawing at them, hidden under the commonplace round of things?

And then she realized that Eddie was looking at her approvingly. He wasn't unconscious of the admiration that Rose Kimm, even in her worn clothes, could call forth wherever she went. That young chap opposite, decidedly a gentleman, was staring at her with startled appreciation. The old codger in the corner was obviously trying to catch her eye. The girl next to him, a thinly pretty young thing, dressed in a style that condemned the plumed hat and purple velvet, nevertheless whispered to her mother, "Look at that woman. Did you ever see any one quite so beautiful?"

Eddie threw back his shoulders. He put a familiar and possessive hand on Rose's knee and said something, very low, in her ear. He counted upon that look of adoration that turned her eyes up to him. That'd let them know she belonged to him.

The woman's heart leaped within her. Maybe she had been wrong. Maybe he was only cross about something. And her whole simple brain swam in a new hope.

She looked happily at the pretty girl, who was still staring at her. Rose Kimm was grateful for that look. She envied her fresh sweetness. Perhaps, if she had a hat like that girl's, and a soft pink dress, Eddie would be kind as he had been in the beginning.

Rose Kimm's slow mind swung upon the pivot of the girl's clothes and her own. If she had better clothes, she'd have a chance. Eddie was right. She'd been wearing these old rags forever. It was impossible to get money from Cap. He wasn't stingy. He just never had any. This Christmas money was the first he'd given her in months.

Eddie helped her off the car. She smiled at him, her heart suffocating with tenderness.

She went home in a cloud of delight. Everything was ablaze; she was drugged with happiness. She had passed out of the dingy circle of houses by the track, the barefooted child playing in the gutter, the ineffectual man who was her husband. Nothing existed in her, nothing had existed for her during the past hours, that connected her with them at all.

She was simply a woman, mad with fear, fighting for her love. Not a pretty rôle, nor a successful one, but a rôle that could make all else fade from the consciousness of a Rose Kimm.

Hope had swept her from her moorings.

Then she saw Sharon sitting on the curb, making pictures in the dust with her bare toes. Beside her

sat the Deming boy, in his corduroys and old red sweater. Sharon liked the Deming boy most of the time. He understood about playing things. He could pretend. To her surprise, most children couldn't. They were embarrassed and awkward about it. They were conscious always of themselves. Sharon, on the other hand, could forget herself in any play ever invented.

The Deming boy could pretend, if you pretended his sort of thing. Sharon had come to understand that in this world you must take people as you found them. And the Deming boy was excellent at pretending Indian and foreman. Sharon was willing to adapt herself to him.

Rose Kimm walked slowly toward them. Once she ran her tongue over her lips, like an opium smoker beginning to come out of his dream. Her throat felt dry and thirsty.

When she was quite close she heard Sharon's husky little voice, talking to the Deming boy.

"I'm going to have a Christmas tree," it said, "a Christmas tree with candles and shiny stuff and stars and a dolly and candy canes. Everything on it, just like those you see in the stores."

The Deming boy looked at her rather scornfully. Rum little kid, Sharon Kimm. For a girl she was fun to play with, because she was never afraid of anything. She had even climbed the very highest telegraph pole and once she had tried to ride a brake-beam. The cop had licked her for that. Besides, somewhere in the Deming boy burned chivalry. He didn't like the way the other girls treated Sharon. They made him sick. He liked Sharon better than them, that was a cinch.

But still, he couldn't see any reason to get so excited about a Christmas tree.

"Gee, don't you usually have a Christmas tree?" he asked, with contempt. "We do. Don't you remember the swell one we had last year?"

Sharon gave him a green look, her mouth puckered to a tuneless whistle.

"I remember," said Sharon softly, "you bet! But your old ma didn't ask me to look at it. I don't care, I didn't want to see your old Christmas tree. Probably was lousy. I saw Lucia Morgan's, though. It was a swell one, you bet. Her ma asked me in. Besides——"

She stopped. Her thin throat was quivering like a bird's and, though Rose Kimm couldn't see her eyes, she knew that they were the sea-blue that flowed into them when Sharon was very happy.

"Besides—that's not like having your own. Presents is all right. I got a present last year. But—I want me a Christmas tree. With candles and stars and cornuceptions. I——" she looked at him, narrowing her eyes. Sharon was not one to blab her dreams to a hard world. But the Deming boy had nice brown eyes and her small heart was very full. "I can see it now. I been seeing it all day. In my head. You know when you want something bad, if you shut your eyes you can see it? I'm going to stay awake tonight just as long as I can, seeing it. And in the morning—it'll be there."

Rose Kimm went slowly up the board walk, up the four unpainted steps that led to her house.

At the sound of her feet on the steps, Sharon turned. Her face was full of lights that danced in her eyes and

in her bronze hair that was already so much darker than her mother's, and in the dimples about her round mouth. Her mouth was the only thing about Sharon's face that seemed to belong to a child of six.

The sea-blue eyes fastened on the big, flat box under Rose's arm. They peeped, half shyly, as though fearing to see too much, half boldly, as though she could not wait.

"Is that—the Christmas?" she whispered.

Rose Kimm did not answer. She went on quietly into the dark living-room.

The clouds that banked so blackly hung a dense curtain in all the corners of the room. Rose Kimm could not see the little Christmas tree her husband had carried home the night before, with that pathetic and proud delight of his. She had not thought she noticed his delight much. Nor his pride. Yet that delight and that pride walked with her now, as Sharon's words walked, accusing angels with flaming swords.

She went over and looked at the tree. She stood there a long time, the poor ghost of pine scent in her nostrils.

Then she turned and went, with slow step, into the bedroom.

Little Sharon Kimm slipped through the front door, her eyes down, in sweet secret anticipation. Her dancing feet made no noise upon the porch, but she banged the door loudly, so that any one might be warned of her approach.

It was entirely dark, now, in the small parlor. Outside, the clouds that pressed down upon the earth had begun to bleed heavy sluggish drops.

"Mama?" said Sharon Kimm.

No answer came. Sharon laughed. Mama was hiding the things.

Still laughing, she went over to the Christmas tree, touched it.

Then she called again, "Mama?"

It was kind of funny mama didn't answer. It was kind of funny there was no light in the kitchen. She listened, one foot seeking comfort from the other.

Raindrops had begun to fall dully upon the worn shingles.

She was afraid of the dark now. She stood still, afraid to move.

"Mama!" she screamed, and ran into the kitchen. She climbed upon the sink and reached for the swaying light. Its rays found the room empty except for dirty dishes and stale food.

But beyond, the light began to creep into the bedroom.

Sharon got down, and went slowly into that room. She was not afraid now.

Three times she swallowed, and then she said again, "Mama!"

Her hands shook the silken shoulder, pulling it. "Mama, speak to me."

They found her sitting there, in the dim light, trying to hold back with her two dirty little hands the life-blood that poured in a dark stain over the finery of Rose Kimm's new pink dress.

Some of the story of Sharon Kimm's childhood the world was to know when its spotlight fell fully upon her. But only the best of it, cleansed and polished by

expert hands. Probably Mrs. Deming and the Deming boy would hardly have recognized that story as it reached the world.

Anyway, there was much that only Lucia knew, Lucia into whose narrow cot they carried the silent, quivering child on that night before Christmas. Lucia's heart had opened and taken her in, and she had tried for days to bring back some color to the white cheeks and some sparkle to the blank, frightened eyes. Perhaps that was why, to the very end, through the glory and the shame, Lucia was to love Sharon better than any one else in the world loved her.

Except Mickey Reid.

And perhaps that was why Lucia turned such tender, tear-dimmed eyes on the girl in the rocking-chair, who sat motionless with her head bowed, her eyes on the gilt buckles of her shoes—the girl who had lost her job.

"I'm sorry, darling," said Lucia, taking the last stitch in the cheap stockings. "It's an injustice. But I don't see what we can do."

Sharon Kimm got up and began to prowls nervously up and down the room. She was not pretty, when her eyes narrowed like that, with her round chin thrust out and her red lips drawn back against her teeth. She looked angry and dangerous and capable of almost anything.

"Some day," said Sharon Kimm, "my luck's going to turn. You're bound to play out your bad luck sometime. I've had ten years of it—eighteen years of it, if you come to that, Lute. And when my turn comes, won't I make 'em pay? I've got a lot to make up for, and believe me, if I ever get a chance, I'll do it."

CHAPTER III

IT WAS a week before Sharon Kimm realized she had been blacklisted in Hollywood.

There is an inner fraternity in Hollywood. A protective loyalty against the outsider. It is a gang town. Civil war there may be upon occasion, but it will disappear instantly when an unbroken front is needed to present to an invader.

Boudoir politics still play a large part in the destiny of Hollywood's sons and daughters. But contrary to popular report, the boudoir is often as virtuous as that of an old-maid schoolma'am. The Hollywood of today is not unlike the London of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The favor of the "country houses," the friendship within certain cliques, the good will of certain social sets, is a powerful factor, always to be reckoned with.

True, there is some amorous intrigue. A casual remark concerning a lady much in favor may cost a release or a contract. But there is more social and brother-in-law diplomacy. Dinners given at a psychological moment to cement doubtful relations. Friendships swinging the deciding vote concerning coveted parts.

Hollywood has its Lady Hollands, its Lady Jerseys, its Lady Mary Montagues, as well as its DuBarrys and Pompadours.

A Hollywood historian, to be accurate, must draw thumbnail sketches of these as well as the beautiful, but occasionally dumb, stars whom the world knows well.

For instance, his tale must be incomplete without the mention of an extremely moral scenario writer, of blue blood and charming personality, who has nevertheless a talent for intrigue which Catherine de Medici herself might have envied; whose lightest word has some great meaning; who never makes a move that does not predict something in the future of the screen industry.

Or a suave and blarneying fat man who controls the actions of certain great stars without their half suspecting his influence—a man who might have tried conclusions with Wolsey or competed with Richelieu.

Or a tiny, blonde wife, bobbed and pretty as an ingénue, whose word is more powerful upon an important lot than the word of a Prime Minister's wife was supposed to be not so long ago in England.

Or a serene and lovely hostess at whose dinner table many problems of the realm are settled, as Macaulay tells us they used to be settled at Holland House, under the eagle eye of Lady Holland.

Or an irascible and sharp-tongued old lady, with a dangerous wit and a devastating frankness, to whose bark her son and his colleagues are wont to listen with something like awe, and who is flattered and cajoled by all the beautiful flappers—most unsuccessfully.

There are houses to which an invitation means social prestige, a place in the charmed circle. There are “cat parties,” invitations to which are coveted and angled for.

It is not all as simple as it is made to look in the

yellow journals. Wheels within wheels, cogs within cogs, constantly revolving.

Any old-timer could have informed Sharon Kimm that when Mildred Rideout told her story many gates would be closed in Sharon's eager face. Unfortunately for her, Mildred was popular. Many people who knew Aaron Savage felt sorry for Mildred and, since they dared not vent their feelings upon him, they were glad to vent them on the girl in the case—whoever she happened to be at the moment. Mildred's devotion to him had become something of a tradition and as such was not condemned.

But Sharon knew no old-timers. She had few friends. She never dreamed of such a thing as a blacklisting.

The morning after she left the Savage lot, by request, she started out to find another job. This was no new experience in Sharon's life. It seemed to her she had done little else. But this time it was more intense.

She realized that when Lucia began a campaign against giving her any car-fare. Lucia was always darned tight about money, but when she started to hold out car-fare it was a sign of the worst.

She registered her protest while Sharon took her morning bath. Sharon loved ice-cold water. Every sense delighted in its touch. She liked to lie buried in it, up to her chin, looking down at her shortened toes and her white body.

Lucia came to the door, the oatmeal spoon in one hand.

"Do hurry, dear," she said, "and if you get started early you may find work today. Goodness knows we could use the money."

Sharon leaped out and began rubbing herself with the puny towel.

"Darned old towel," said Sharon, pirouetting beneath it like a ballet dancer. "Gosh, Lute, these are the bum-mest towels! When I get rich, I'm going to have towels as big as the blankets on our bed. And I'll have dozens of them so I can get all dry. This one don't leave anything to dry your feet on."

She began then a dance that had been popular years before she was born. Among other lean adventures, Sharon had once gained some money and much experience dancing in the reformed ghost of what had been the toughest dive in America.

Lucia came in just then with the coffee. "Sharon Kimm," she said, her voice disapproving but her eyes dwelling with admiration on the perfect body before her, "put on your clothes. Haven't you any shame?"

Sharon slipped into her cotton undershirt. "I haven't got nothing to be ashamed of, Miss Prunes. Besides, I look better with my clothes off than I do with them on. When I get rich, I'm going to have silk underclothes, too, you bet. Lots of women do."

"Well," said Lucia dryly, "speaking of being rich, do you know how much money we've got at the present moment?"

Sharon's brow clouded. "Oh, hell!" she said miserably. "About a dime, I suppose."

"Four dollars and eighty-five cents," said Lucia, pouring a spoonful of condensed milk on her oatmeal from the little can, "and you'll have to walk today, that's all. The rent's due next week, and we've got to eat. I'm sorry, darling."

"Well," said Sharon, as she kissed her over the drained coffee cups, "it looks like if I don't get a job pretty quick we're apt to starve to death. We never have yet, but there's a first time for everything. And I've come close enough a few times to know there's nothing romantic about dying for your art. Say a couple of prayers for me, Lute. You know more about praying than I do."

On the sidewalk of Hollywood Boulevard she drew a long breath. A breath of delight.

She loved it. She didn't know why—nothing in her life had taught her to analyze anything—but she did. Her eyes danced and the dimples deep about her mouth danced and the blood in her veins danced to a little tune.

The Boulevard always did that to her—lifted her to the crest of the wave. Silly, probably, but it always did and it always would. Because Sharon belonged to Hollywood. She had given herself to Hollywood, while the heart and soul of her were malleable as fine gold, and in return Hollywood was to give her many things, not all of them good. But the two of them were bound together so close that the history of Sharon Kimm is almost the heart-history of Hollywood.

She began to walk down the Boulevard, sniffing the sights and sounds and scents of it with an impish pleasure.

Oh, outwardly it wasn't so different from any other street, any other small town, any other flowering suburb!

But Sharon knew a lot of things. She had a secret understanding with the very pavements. She wasn't de-

ceived by that bright, sylvan surface any more than a lover is deceived by the expressionless mask his mistress turns upon him in a public place.

Oh, she was a minx, Hollywood! Sharon knew that, too. And responded. Sharon was something of a minx herself.

It was all very well for this home of her desires and her ambitions and her dreams to stand knee-deep in golden poppies and blue larkspur and waving wheat, smiling in simplicity upon the multitudes, like some Follies dairymaid. That didn't fool Sharon.

For Sharon knew her to be a Lorelei, singing the enchanting song of fame. That song was in Sharon's ears day and night. And the Lorelei's hands were full of gold and jewels and the peculiar treasures of kings. The sight of them was in Sharon's eyes, day and night. And she held a magic mirror that might transform a shoddy, shabby, little nobody like Sharon Kimm into a fairy princess with a starry crown upon her head. Sharon's heart beat high at the thought of that magic mirror.

And she sang songs, as all Loreleis do, concerning kings and queens and courtesans within her kingdom, that were like tales of a new Arabian Nights. Sharon knew every one of those songs by heart and the taste of such adventures was like an enticement upon her lips.

Afterwards, on that night when she stood face to face with the girl in the Plaza, Sharon Kimm was to know even more of Hollywood, and to see her as a witch with the head of a sphinx—pregnant with hope, hilarious with laughter, sodden with tears, streaked with tragedy, crowned with delight.

And even then, Sharon still loved her.

But on that spring morning, as she walked along the Boulevard, a little unknown figure in an ill-fitting suit and unbecoming hat, Sharon was very far indeed from dreaming of the girl in the Plaza.

Nobody paid any attention to her. Even the group of taxi-drivers loitering at the corner of Cahuenga, didn't give her a second glance. There was no reason why they should. She was nobody and the lure of her was buried in cheap clothes, badly worn.

And she hated being nobody. Her mouth was wry with it and her eyes green with it. But her toes tingled with the promises, the chances, that lay within this magic city.

If she could only get a chance! If she could only get started!

She turned the corner and went up a side street, beneath rows of pepper trees that scattered their red berries and yellow flowers at her feet. The sidewalks around the Hirt Studio were always sticky with pepper berries.

She knew the gateman at the Hirt Studio. He could, if he would, let her in to see the seventh assistant casting director of that great institution. But she wasn't very hopeful about it. A great many girls had tried to vamp that gateman. But he was old and very tired of girls—especially pretty girls. They interested him about as much as chocolate creams interest a candy salesman. He had been besieged, in his day, by beauties whose names now meant money in any box-office and he had known some of the twinkling stars when they borrowed lunch money. And he had come to the con-

clusion that all is vanity and vexation of spirit, as the preacher said.

But Sharon smiled at him just the same, shyly. When Sharon smiled, her eyes opened wide and dominated her whole face, innocent, strange, eager eyes that were never twice the same color because of the shifting thoughts and emotions behind them.

And then the smile was wiped from her eyes, and they began to grow darker, until they were almost black. For just inside the gate, hatless in the sun and smiling that quizzical, cool smile of his, she saw William Dvorak. Her heart turned over completely. There flitted through her brain a wild idea of dashing through the gate, past the dozing gateman, and flinging herself at William Dvorak's feet.

It would be dramatic. But, somehow, as she watched, she didn't think it would be successful.

As a matter of fact, it was difficult at first glance to find anything about William Dvorak that could make a young girl's heart leap into her throat. A short, powerfully built man, beginning to go bald above his forehead, with a pair of mesmeric gray eyes, touched always by that slight, ironic smile, as his one beauty. The heavy white silk shirt—he always wore exactly that same shirt whether the rest of his costume was composed of riding-breeches or dinner coat—was open at the front, and showed his powerful neck. He had a dominant, curved nose, and an intellectual mouth, both suggestive of breeding and an ancestry used to command.

Somebody had once said that he looked like Napoleon and he had rather adopted the pose. It wasn't a bad

one and a man like William Dvorak, who is constantly in the limelight, must have a pose of some kind, if only as a defense. For that matter, almost every one in Hollywood has a pose of one sort or another, in order to stand out from the background.

But it was not the man that made Sharon's heart behave so erratically. It was his power.

For he was the man whose nod made and unmade stars.

William Dvorak was more than the most successful of box-office directors. He was more than one of the shrewdest producers in the game. He was more than a clever showman, who kept that ironic gray eye fixed continually upon the pulse record of the public taste.

He possessed a certain clairvoyance that enabled him to pick from the ranks people whom the public could be taught to adore and pay money to look upon. It is a strange talent, belonging to only a few great ones of the stage and screen. In no one was it more marked than in William Dvorak. The list of his discoveries was long.

That was why Sharon Kimm trembled when she looked at him, her cheeks a soft tangerine glow.

Her Irish imagination was caught by the drama of the thing. Here they stood, two human beings, within a few feet of each other. If his eye should light upon her, his all-seeing eye, her struggles might be over. If she could will him to notice her, this man could make all her dreams come true. A whisper would draw his attention, probably, and she dared not speak.

If he would only look at her!

But his glance passed over her without a flicker of

hesitation. No prophetic sense brought it to a halt upon the slim, quivering figure, nor told him that some day his life and hers would be joined in strange issues.

William Dvorak was a man who desired women, and a man who desires women may some day be mastered by the desire for one woman. But his taste was rare and exotic, to be stimulated only by the beautiful and unattainable. Certainly there was no reason for him to be attracted by the hungry, ill-dressed little girl at the gate.

When he had gone, striding off in that conquering way of his, Sharon Kimm sank limply against the wall, her hands pressed down over her lips to keep back a sob of disappointment.

The wheel had spun, the flying ball hesitated—and again passed her by.

"He's—wonderful, isn't he?" she said timidly to the gateman.

"Who?" The gateman had been thinking deeply about a real-estate investment he had just made. Of course all Hollywood property was bound to be good, in time. But this particular hill lot seemed accessible at present only to an eagle or an airplane.

"Mr. Dvorak."

"I guess so," said the gateman. "He's the works around here, all right. And he's sure made money out of real estate. If pictures was to go out of existence tomorrow—*tomorrow*—he wouldn't care. He's got oil wells and banks and factories and tracts——"

"All made out of pictures," said Sharon Kimm, with one of those flashes of hers.

But the gateman had gone back to his speculation

about subdivisions and Sharon walked slowly away. Her eyes felt hot with tears. As she walked around the corner from the Hirt to the Churchill Studio, a chill began to creep over her exaltation of the morning.

On the steps of the main building, a gray shingle affair with red-striped awnings, she met a girl she knew, a black-haired, black-eyed girl in a fur coat and a smart hat. Sharon didn't know her well and she couldn't remember her name. She might summon impudence to her own defense, but Sharon wasn't a good mixer. She made friends slowly, because of a fear of her own inferiority, which she would never admit.

"Hello!" said the girl in the fur coat. "I heard you got fired at Savage's. What happened?"

Sharon's eyes narrowed. She wasn't surprised. The underground channels carry news fast in Hollywood. No one has ever kept a secret there yet. A few people may think they have, but they are the people whom Hollywood loves well enough to keep quiet about.

Of course, in this instance, Sharon wasn't important; but Mildred Rideout and the man were. For the first time it occurred to Sharon that it might make it more difficult to find work.

"Well," she said, "you do know a lot, don't you? If you know so much, you ought to know why I got fired. It'd be silly for me to try to learn you—to give you any information. But I'll bet I know where you got that fur coat."

The girl grinned good-naturedly. "Yes? All right, Mr. Bones, where did I get this fur coat?"

"Why, you found a pawn ticket," said Sharon Kimm, and they laughed together.

After all, they were both bucking the same game. Why knife each other?

"Is Guy in?" Sharon asked, and the girl nodded and went her good-natured way.

Sharon knew Guy Churchill, head of the big comedy studio, where they turned out two-reel "laugh-makers" by the hundreds. Everybody knew Guy. Nothing up-stage about him. He was just as easy to see as the postman. And no one had ever seen Guy Churchill angry or found him disagreeable. He was a meal ticket for half the bums in town.

Sharon heard him shouting as she approached his office. He was always shouting at somebody, but it was like the bark of a big friendly dog.

"You tell that gosh-darned fool," he shouted, "that I said he was to make pictures my way or get another job and I don't care much which. I'm paying the bills around here and I don't care what he thinks."

He banged up the receiver as Sharon sauntered in.

"Say," she said coolly, "you don't need no telephone. They can hear you through the window."

The man roared with easy laughter. "Not clear to New York, I guess, honey," he said.

He called every woman "honey." It was merely a habit, neither an invitation nor a threat. Guy Churchill had a wife whom he and the rest of the picture colony adored and whose sense of humor didn't prevent her from keeping a tight rein on Guy.

"I got a director back there," he went on, "says he wants to make better pictures. I told him pictures is plenty good enough. The public don't want better pictures. They've proved it. Most good pictures is

flops. Are they, or aren't they? I'm not in this business for my health. If folks want to be educated, let 'em go to school. If they want to be uplifted, let 'em go to church. The preachers is starving to death now. Motion-picture business is a business like anything else."

He said a great deal more. No man in pictures could talk more and say less than Guy Churchill. And Guy never said "No." On the other hand, he never said "Yes." So there you were!

There, too, was Sharon, out on the street once more, still without a job and her face set against a growing certainty. There had been something in his manner—and aloofness—a coldness of eye. She shivered.

Mildred Rideout was a friend of his. The black-haired girl, who was a great gossip, had just left him. Well, that was a tough break.

The next walk was longer. She wished she had *made* Lucia give her car-fare. Her feet began to burn on the sidewalk. The sun had come from behind the fog and the air was heavy and sticky with it.

She thought with a bitter grin of that visiting friend of Lucia's who had conceived Hollywood's picture colony as something like an army barracks, and the homes of film stars as built in a segregated encampment. Sharon wished that visiting friend had to walk the distances between studios sometimes. At least Lucia would next day have to provide the fare to Culver City, where several of the studios were located.

"Still, it's only eight miles down there," Sharon said to the deserted side street. "Probably she'll want me to walk that, too."

Her body ached with fatigue and her soul with discouragement. And she knew she was growing weary of the unequal fight. Wasn't she ever going to have anything in this world? Wasn't she ever going to be anybody?

The past rose starkly behind her.

Her soul shuddered away from the memory of those lean years following her mother's death. Hard, bitter, lonely years. For Sharon's father had been right. Life seemed to stop for him when the warm beauty of Rose no longer quickened it within him. He had hung on a little while and then slipped away, almost without making a ripple in his small circle. His going hadn't meant much even to Sharon. Things had really been happier for her at the Morgans', where she went to live. Lucia was the person in the world closest to her and they were kind people, even if they were so poor. The county allowed them three dollars a month for her keep. That was a lot of money to Sharon and the Morgans. Only, Sharon hated being a ward of the County Charities.

As soon as Lucia and she were old enough, they went to work in a bakery. It wasn't unpleasant—wrapping the fresh, sweet-smelling loaves in oiled paper.

Lucia studied all the time, and took night courses in stenography at the nearest high school. But Sharon hated that kind of dry and impersonal work. She was glad to be through with school. No one had ever made it appeal to her in any way. She liked to read if she could find books about kings and queens and millionaires—books that described their lives and surroundings and possessions. The only books her mother ever read.

When she left the bakery it was for a laundry. The work was hard, but Sharon wasn't afraid of hard work; and the pay was good. It allowed her to save a little money, so that when Lucia became a stenographer, they could begin their efforts to "get into pictures." Sharon cherished that ambition with determination and a steely purpose. She had read of the fame and fortune of picture stars.

And, after a year, a long, hard-fought year, here she was back at the beginning. Forlorn and worse than friendless. She faced the thought of starting once more upon that heart-sickening round of the studios, with the first real hopelessness that had ever touched her.

There may be something more difficult somewhere in the world than trying to break through into that charmed circle, where lies success; but Sharon, who had known life in some pretty tough spots, had never been up against anything like that. The thing to be feared wasn't immorality, nor persecution of an innocent girl, nor intentional cruelty. What filled her with dread was the memory of a supreme indifference, a complete preoccupation that had met her at every turn in the road.

They just didn't give a damn. They didn't know that Sharon Kimm existed and they were willing to continue in that ignorance. It was going up against a closed corporation. It took the heart out of her. The truth was that the blow of the day before had told more than she cared to admit.

Back on the Boulevard, she went into a small casting agency, and stood there, putting on a bold front to

cover a sense of her own inadequacy. Not a vestige of the joy and fight with which she had started the day remained. Sharon was like that. Either on the crest of the wave or in the valley of despond.

The young man at the desk, blond and blasé, gave her an indifferent look—the sort of look that a dealer in second-hand furniture might cast upon a chair offered for his bid. Impersonal. Appraising. Bored. Then he continued his conversation on the telephone.

Sharon sat down defiantly in the best wicker rocking-chair. Certainly she wasn't going to be snubbed by any office boy in a bum casting agency. Not if she knew it.

When he had finished, he came over and spoke to her.

"You've been working at Savage's, haven't you?" he asked.

"You ought to know," said Sharon, drawing her level black brows together. "You got me the job."

"Why did you leave?"

Sharon had been thinking up an answer to that question all morning and hadn't yet found the right one. That was the reason she had delayed coming to the agency until the last.

The young man stood looking down at her with a frown.

He saw a thin, white, little girl, with a mass of hair like an autumn leaf, and long, light-gray eyes deeply rimmed with black. Puzzled by some suggestion of haunting grace, he noticed the way her head was fitted so perfectly upon the long, round throat, and he was conscious, as he looked, of the perfection of her small hands, on which the laundry had left no trace, and her slim ankles.

His eyes fastened upon her mouth, that was almost round because of the full lower lip, and the deep bow in the upper one. It made a splash of color on her face, as though some one had crushed a red rosebud there.

The blond and blasé young man was more and more puzzled and a good deal annoyed. He was annoyed because he found this sullen girl in her terrible clothes strangely attractive. And he was puzzled because he knew she was not beautiful and he could not analyze her charm.

Long afterwards, the blond and blasé young man was wont to tell of that meeting, in various cafés on the Boulevard where he and his cronies gathered.

"I felt something unusual about her," he would say, "though goodness knows she was a scarecrow, and thin as a starved Armenian. And yet, knowing women and motion pictures as I do, I recognized underneath a rare charm and beauty and a great dramatic ability. I got her a job, all right. So, I suppose, if I wanted to, I might say I discovered Sharon Kimm."

As a matter of fact, at the time he was only puzzled and consequently very rude. He stood staring down at Sharon, his eyes beginning to grow hot. Instantly, as she met that look, Sharon's eyes narrowed. She despised that look in the eyes of men. Disdained it. It did not even flatter her, as it flattered many women.

Under it, she flared into reckless frankness. "I left because I got fired. I got fired for something that wasn't my fault. It had nothing to do with my work. Believe it or not, that's the truth."

"Well," said the man, angry and flushed under her disdain, "I'll do what I can. But I can't keep getting

you jobs if you don't keep them. If I were you, I'd give up this picture bug. To tell you the truth, you're not the type for the screen. The market's overcrowded. You'd better go to the exchange, if you're determined to keep on."

Sharon banged the door behind her.

The exchange. The place where directors sent when they wanted hundreds of people for a mob scene. Where the type extras—men with beards, or negroes, or fat washerwoman—registered and were on call. The bottom of the ladder. The exchange where you hadn't even a name but were herded together like cattle and sent in lots with a number to the studios like so many cans of tomatoes. It seemed to her she had already spent a lifetime in that place, sitting on the wooden benches with men and women of every race, color, and odor in the world.

She couldn't go back. But she did—sick, weary and beaten.

And that day was only the beginning of a long deadly week.

At the end of it, Sharon Kimm realized that she was on the blacklist.

"I didn't think she'd do that," she said to Lucia rather wildly, on the evening of the seventh day. Panic had washed her eyes to a light gray. "I should think she'd be satisfied now that she's got me off the lot and out of her way. I don't see what good it does her to starve me to death."

"Maybe she hasn't," said Lucia, trying to be calm and motherly beyond her twenty years; "maybe you just imagine it. Things have—just gone against us,

darling, that's all. I'm sure I'll get work soon. I don't think Miss Rideout would do that."

"Well, she has. Other girls get work."

"Mr. Alden promised me something. Oh, Sharon, if somebody would only buy one of my stories!"

It was not often that Lucia spoke of her own disappointments. They did not compare, even in her own mind, with Sharon's. In their friendship, it was Lucia who comforted and adored, and Sharon who received.

"Well, they won't," said Sharon, curling her slim ankles under her, on the let-down bed. "As for promises, this damn town is full of promises. No—something is wrong. I didn't do so bad at Savage's. And it means something to have been a Savage bathing-girl, even for a short time. That's why—I was so pleased and happy when I got it. I thought it'd—give me my chance. Now—I can't even get a chance to be in a mob."

"Maybe there aren't any mobs just now," said Lucia.

"There are always mobs." Sharon never cried, but Lucia could tell from her voice that her throat was closed with misery. "Besides, everybody is too polite. Nobody is ever polite in Hollywood. You know that. When they just ignored me, it hurt, but it was natural. You know, Lute, I've never played around much.

"A lot of girls do, and they know everybody. But I can't see as it gets them anywhere. Most of the girls in this town that—pay the price, sure do get cheated. The extra girls change every two years. Why, in two years there won't hardly be a girl working around the studios that's there now. And you bet they don't all become stars or Daddy's darlings. Most of them go back to the counter or the—laundry, where they come

from. And it's usually the fresh cuties that go on all the parties and are the directors' little playmates that go first.

"Not me! So it was all right when nobody noticed me, because I've stayed to myself a good deal. Too much, maybe. But when they start to apologizing, then I knowed they had a guilty conscience. I guess that story Mildred Rideout told made me look pretty bum."

"No, darling, no!" Lucia cried. "You're too sensitive. You take everything to heart so."

"Take everything to heart?" Sharon flamed at her. "I do? What'd you think? And I'm walking on cardboard in my shoes, and nobody wants me, and my clothes—they look like they come out of a rag-bag——"

Suddenly Sharon turned and put her head against Lucia's warm shoulder.

"I'm hungry," she said.

They clung a moment, and then Sharon sat up, and began to giggle.

"Hell!" she said, and she flung back her head so that the mass of hair danced in the dim light like some magnificent flag of defiance. "Something'll happen, maybe. I know one thing about pictures. It's generally accidents that get you your chance, if you haven't got a pull. And I guess all the accidents in the world haven't already happened. One might still happen to me."

CHAPTER IV

NOTHING could have surprised Sharon Kimm more than to know that an event of tremendous import to her was taking place at that very moment in the stately dining-room of Nadine Allis.

If Sharon thought about Nadine Allis at all—and of course she did, exactly as every one else did in Hollywood, because Nadine was not only an important but a popular person as well—it was with bated breath and a sort of deep, loving envy.

For Nadine Allis had all the things Sharon wanted and was all the things Sharon hoped to be.

Certainly it would never have occurred to Sharon that Fate and the great Nadine Allis were combining in plans that were to change her life. Sharon did not know the great star, and she would have been awed and overcome if she had so much as peeped into Nadine's dining-room, and seen the glittering glass and silver and the rich and elaborately served food.

In those days, Nadine Allis was considered the last word in elegance.

It was at the dinner table that Nadine, in the impulsive way that marked most of her decisions, suddenly remarked that she must have something original and jazzy at her party the next night. Nadine was famous for her parties and she was proud of her reputation as a hostess.

"People are so tired of just parties," said Nadine, looking across at her husband, with those big, friendly blue eyes of hers, set bewitchingly far apart and ever so little aslant. "If they're bored there is nothing to do but make love or get drunk and, as they always make love to the wrong people, either one makes things unpleasant."

Her mother, looking at her with non-committal eyes, said, "The trouble with society here is that you don't seem to ask the people you want or the people you like. You just ask the people who are somebody. You ask names. Isn't that true now?"

Nadine laughed at her. There was something inexpressibly gay in Nadine's laughter. The silky, pale-gold curls that grew behind her ears and that never, never would stay in their proper places, slipped down upon her cheeks. The round dimples grew deeper.

The screen has missed something in Nadine Allis's voice. A light voice, but full of shadowy pools of melody. A voice suggestive of happy and delightful secrets. A voice that had an undercurrent of laughter, and yet was often sad. People were always repeating things that Nadine Allis had said. And when they were repeated they sounded flat and uninspired, because they were actually neither witty nor profound. It was only the cadence of them that had made them remembered.

Still laughing, Nadine made a little grimace at her husband.

"Mr. Irving Spencer Kohl," she said, "will you please listen to me? You are the impolitest man I ever saw in my life."

"He doesn't mean to be impolite," said Nadine's mother hastily. She had a habit of speaking of her son-in-law in an abstract way, as though he were not present. "Can't you see he's just busy? And I expect it's your business, if it comes to that."

"The trouble with my husband," said Nadine with a judicial air, "is that he's a great business man first and my husband afterwards." But there was no malice in her voice when she said it.

"Well," said her mother, her eyes fluttering about, "I suppose there are men who'd think being your husband was the most important thing in the world. But I expect, too, you wouldn't like them very well after you got them. He's a very good man, Irv is, and he's a pretty good husband, if he has got his little peculiarities. All husbands have, once you're married to 'em. I expect if a woman could marry all the men she wanted to she'd find there wasn't much difference in 'em in the end. You're real lucky, take it all in all."

The hawk-faced little man looked at his mother-in-law approvingly but imperturbably. He had long since ceased to listen to her. He understood her perfectly and was concerned with her only in so far as she could affect Nadine. She was his ally. She had been from the first. Her interests and his were the same.

The motion-picture industry knew Irv Kohl for one of its masters. A man of sound judgment and ordinary caution, taken now and again by a terrific attack of the gambling fever. During those attacks he was capable of the most daring flights into the sun, and it was upon those flights that both his and Nadine's success was founded.

He could talk fast enough, and in terms of millions, when he had to. Only in love was Irv Kohl inarticulate. He could never turn a phrase to meet his wife's light raillery.

"What did you want, dear?" he asked in his guttural voice, which had still the tempo of the foreign language to which he had been born.

Nadine shook her head at him. There was nothing but tolerance in her smile. Nadine was by nature tolerant, anxious to please, anxious that all about her should be happy. If she had a vanity it was the desire to be greatly loved and admired by those near her.

Just as that moment her life was full—full of her own beauty, just reaching its zenith, full of her own success, now at its peak, full of her own popularity. She was tasting life's banquet and finding it very good. But her love was impartial and generally bestowed. Irv Kohl had no one of whom he might be jealous, unless it was Nadine's dressmaker.

He did not know enough about women to realize that the deep, strong current of her nature had never been reached, nor to see that she was a woman who, once awakened, would not be satisfied with toys.

His eyes lighted as he looked at her. Her fairness was full of color, in the dark lashes and brows, the warm skin, the coral lips. She was of those blondes who are loveliest in white, and when she wasn't at work she always wore it.

"I said, you are to think up something unusual for my party," she said severely. "Have you forgotten we're giving a party?"

Her husband sighed. "What do you want to be

always giving parties for, Nadine?" he asked gravely. "Every time I turn around, aren't we giving another party? Sometimes I should think it would be you should rest. With your new picture starting now so soon and all the different dresses you got to wear in it, maybe you photograph better if you stay home and sleep nights instead of always giving parties."

"Pooh!" said Nadine. "I adore it. Why should I rest? I'm as strong as an ox."

"She is, too, Irv," said her mother timidly. "She's young. And she's always been strong ever since she was a baby. She weighed nine pounds and a half when she was born. A man's got to let a woman enjoy herself when she's young. It's nice if she wants to have her friends here in her own house."

In the silence that followed, Nadine fell into one of those animated reveries of hers. You could never imagine Nadine perfectly quiet. Even when she was sitting motionless, she sparkled. There was an abundant and joyous life about her, that expressed itself somehow.

A woman made for love, and yet her face under the golden curls was innocent of passion and of experience.

Irv Kohl had gone back to his endless telegrams. Sometimes it seemed to his wife that Irv existed upon telegrams. And Nadine's mother had resumed that amiable but slightly melancholy contemplation of the ceiling which occupied her leisure.

So it happened that young Frisco Tate entered upon a silence.

He opened the door noiselessly. Frisco had a way of moving without sound that argued none too well

for his past. When Nadine Allis looked up from her brown study, she found Frisco confronting her, in all his strange but accustomed ugliness.

Frisco was very ugly. What he might have been like once, only his mother could know. For life had begun early to change the general contour of young Mr. Tate's countenance. It is possible, even probable, that in the beginning his ears matched. And surely no one was ever born with a nose like his. It was not nature, but certain gentlemen in the pursuit of their profession who were responsible for the fact that one of his eyelids refused, save on very rare occasions, to raise itself at all.

Yet Frisco was a member of the Irving Spencer Kohl productions and an important one at that.

"If you can make Frisco laugh," Irv Kohl once told an aspiring comedian, "you can get the hardest-boiled exhibitor on the exchange." And to the highbrow scenario writer he remarked, "Turn your script over to Frisco, please. If he don't understand it, it's out. Frisco has got what I should call the Average Intelligence of the motion-picture audiences."

The scenario writer quit, but Frisco stayed on. Irv Kohl believed in trying everything on the dog. So Frisco, though his name appeared on the payroll in a more dignified capacity, was actually the dog. Frisco was to Nadine Allis productions what Jersey City and Atlantic City are to New York managers.

Nadine looked at him without changing expression. She had long ago grown used to Frisco's battered countenance appearing at all times and places.

Then she had an inspiration.

Probably Sharon Kimm's career would have been the same if Frisco hadn't appeared in Nadine's dining-room at exactly that moment. But as the Fates had written her story, Frisco was the *deus ex machina*.

"Frisco," said Nadine, "you're the very thing I've been looking for. You have arrived, as it were, at the psychological moment."

"Yeh?" said Frisco. "Well—I just brung over some of that junk for your doings tomorrow night myself. I don't trust no truck driver."

"Frisco," said Nadine, "you are going to be the *pièce de resistance* of my party. If you never do it again, you are going to wrest the spotlight from a lot of actors who have spent their lives fighting for it."

"Yeh?" said Frisco. He did not seem enthusiastic over the prospect.

"Do you remember that dance you did for me with that colored girl up at Purcell's, that time we were in San Francisco on location?" Nadine got up and went over to him. "Will you do that for my gang tomorrow night? It'll be a riot. I'll bet you not one of them ever saw anybody really walk the dog like they used to do it on the Barbary Coast. I know they never did."

"No?" said Frisco. "Where they been all their lives?"

"Well, I never saw it before. Will you do it?"

"Why not?" said Frisco. "I ain't got nothing to be ashamed of. I can stand it if they can. It ain't my idea of refined parlor entertainment, though."

Nadine gave him one of her pretty, friendly looks. There was no coquetry in Nadine Allis. She wanted the world to like her, that was all.

"I guess they can stand it," she said.

"All right. But it's a duet, not a solo. Who'd I get to do it with me, huh?"

Nadine's ready laughter bubbled. Frisco watched her without changing expression. Miss Allis was always laughing. Frisco thought, in view of the general depravity of the world, that it was silly. But he kept silent. He liked her.

"Now, Frisco," she said, "you can't tell me you don't know some girl that would be tickled to death to do it. I know what a ladies' man you are."

"Yeh?" said Frisco. He held to the old gang rule that a man does not boast of his conquests. "Well, I might grab some dame. But there ain't apt to be many gals down here can do it right. I ain't going to do it unless I can do it right, you can shove in your last white chip on that. May look simple, but it has its points. There's just one gal in Hollywood could do it to suit me. She used to be a drink gal in the Thalia after they had to turn it into a soda fountain. They done a fair business with high-toned slumming parties and gangs off the rubberneck wagons—like the fake opium dens in Chinatown do, and this gal I'm speaking of and a wop boy named Joe Petrodez used to walk the dog for 'em. It was all a lot of bunk to clean up on the suckers. Besides, when them psalm-singing reformers come around investigating vice conditions you got to show 'em something pretty raw or they get sore. Every time the purity gang sent a delegation down to be sure the Coast was still nailed up tight, that dance sent 'em away talking to themselves. Only time guys like that ever get a chance to get an eyeful is when they're out reforming."

"Did you say that girl was in Hollywood?" asked Nadine.

"Yeh."

"Get her," said Nadine.

"All right," said Frisco.

"Nadine," said her husband, "you do get the craziest ideas."

"I know," said Nadine. "Isn't it lovely?"

"Lovely?" said Nadine's mother, suddenly taking her eyes off the ceiling and fixing them on her son-in-law.

"Well, I believe in democracy, but I must say you're too democratic to suit me. I brought you up to be a lady."

"Poor mums," said Nadine caressingly.

CHAPTER V

NOW Michael Reid was young, and not at all bad to look upon. There was just a hint of the devil in those dark, roving eyes of his. His shoulders were broad and his figure tapered nicely to a slim waist and long slender legs. His habit of letting just the shadow of a smile flash across his face and disappear in a hard young stare had made any number of feminine hearts beat faster.

Mickey was also, if the truth must be known, a dancing fool, and he had never been able to subscribe whole-heartedly to the Eighteenth Amendment. His ancestors came from Killarney and the mountains of Kerry and have never been famous for respecting the law in times of peace. Fortunately, their war record is studded with medals.

All these things considered, and in addition that upon this particular evening he had been able to tie his dress tie with both dash and elegance, and that his dark hair—which was unruly and apt to betray him by curling in the most unexpected places—had for once succumbed in a flat and shining smoothness, it would seem that Mickey should have been in a glow of anticipation.

But he was not.

Being only a struggling juvenile himself, he was lucky to be invited to Nadine Allis's party at all.

There came the rub.

Micky was nervous, very nervous, about the woman who had invited him. He was afraid she had made up her mind to fall in love with him. And he wasn't quite young enough, young as he was, to enjoy that. He had served his apprenticeship to ladies with coal-black hair, who wore long jet earrings and no more clothes than the law required. And though this particular lady had invented it all, though she was the one, original and only, though men were supposed to have ruined her dainty slippers with their heart's blood, Micky had seen too many imitations to be properly thrilled.

Besides, he strongly suspected that she had had her face lifted.

As he descended the stairs, Mickey's eyebrows formed a wistful question-mark.

The ride over in the taxi proved less troublesome than he had feared. He could be amusing enough when he chose, could young Michael Reid, and he chose very, very hard on that taxi ride. Possibly he wouldn't have to take her home. People so often got lost at Nadine's parties. He would get lost if it were humanly possible. For while one may talk to a lady in a taxi going to a party, it is more difficult—in fact it is almost impossible—to accomplish the same feat going home.

It was a gorgeous party, marked chiefly by an amazing informality. Young Mickey Reid, who had spent the time following his all too brief but glorious moments with the Irish Guards in wandering about the capitals of Europe, found it perhaps just a trifle ostentatious. There seemed to be a little too much of everything.

Afterwards, he had difficulty in remembering the first part of the evening at all clearly.

Nadine was there, of course. He saw her moving among the lilies and carnations, roses and daffodils which filled every nook and corner. She wore something all laces and chiffons, beneath which peeped tiny garlands of roses and sprays of forget-me-nots. No one could have found any fault with Nadine Allis that night, and the rope of pearls that went three times about her throat was no more than a match for the luminous skin.

It is not a natural thing for other women to like a woman as beautiful as Nadine. But they did. Most of them gathered about her. She had a court of younger girls of the colony, who always hung upon her word.

That is an odd phenomenon of all Hollywood parties, Mickey Reid had discovered it before. During the first hour the women gather in little groups and gossip. The men gather in other little groups and drink.

Irv Kohl soon disappeared. Every one expected that. The card room on the second floor was famous. Mickey Reid could imagine the thousands of dollars that hung upon the turn of a card just above his head.

Mickey was relieved when he disappeared. He liked Irv Kohl, but the romance in his heart recoiled from the sight of him beside Nadine, as her husband, her possessor.

There were a great many important people present.

He saw Edwin Vaughn and his wife, always a little aloof, always vaguely uncomfortable. Her hair was so elaborately arranged, her manner so stiff. He wan-

dered over and tried to talk with them. But he couldn't. The trouble was, they had no sense of humor. Why couldn't the idiots be human, instead of taking themselves so seriously?

Margaret Vane was there, serene and shining. She nodded to him, with her grave gaiety, and started to beckon, but a man came up and swept her away, and she could only wave back at Mickey with a show of regret. He was a bit intrigued by Margaret Vane.

As she floated out on the polished cement floor of the patio, where they were dancing, he had a vision of Mrs. Tom Channing, sitting alone, parked by a husband who had gone in search of pastures new. The sight of her brought a frown to his face. The woman wore too many jewels. It was such rotten bad taste. It called attention to her colorless hair, and her wrinkled neck, and her haunted face. Those seven-and-eight-carat rings on her fingers, that tiara in her hair!

And then he felt suddenly ashamed and sorry for her. He had a glimpse of her eyes as they followed her husband. So a woman could still love a man like Tom Channing, could still shrink from the parade of his disgrace! Tom was drunk, as usual, drunk and nasty and looking for trouble. He'd find it before the night was over. He always did. The man was insufferable. If he hadn't been Tom Channing, he wouldn't have been allowed in any decent house.

Servants were everywhere, passing cocktails and highballs on silver trays. The supper, served continuously in the dining-room, was marvelous. Mickey, who had a young and healthy appetite, captured Anne Se-

bring, and took her away into a corner to eat with him. She was a pretty thing with her small face under its folds of curly blond hair. The perfect ingénue, just then at the top of her vogue. He didn't like her husband. So that was all right.

In the dining-room, the champagne flowed freely. They carried it up in tubs full of ice. Mickey drank of it. But it was the lights, and the throbbing music, and the scent and color of the flowers mingled with the perfumes and enticing gowns of the women, the glitter of jewels against bare arms and shoulders, that made him a trifle drunk.

So that Anne Sebring, looking into his eyes, and at his clean young lips twisted in their crooked smile, felt some sudden thrill and got up and started across the crowded room, with Mickey following, tall and leisurely and much amused, behind her.

"Afraid, little Anne?" he asked mischievously.

And because she had reached her husband's side, little Anne looked up at him and said, mischievously, too, "Yes."

On the floor in the big hall, a group had started to play "Jong-Keena." The chant floated over the noise and laughter. Tom Channing was there, engineering the thing—no one else would have dared—and little Pearl Ward, and Pepper O'Malley, and the great Diane Lamartine, her dark foreign face flushed with the excitement of the new game. She had already lost all her hairpins and one silver slipper. When she saw Mickey she beckoned him to join. But Mickey shook his head. He knew something of "Jong-Keena," an ancient game of the Orient designed to achieve the

same end as strip-poker but with more fun in the process. And he wasn't surprised when Nadine Allis came and asked them, very prettily, not to play.

Mickey went away and danced once with Lois Larribee, who was the latest thing in screen beauties. The same Lois Larribee who was one day to become a Duchess, and a tradition in another country because of her goodness. But Lois hadn't started to be good on that evening of Nadine's party. She had just started to be bad, and her eyes—deep violet eyes—invited Mickey Reid to be bad with her.

He liked the feel of her in his arms, as if she were not there at all, and yet he was always conscious of her nearness.

But when he had left her, he felt suddenly very unhappy.

For Mickey Reid was one of those men who desire the One Woman. There was nothing of the Turk about Mickey Reid. He had never lacked women who were willing to love him and he had loved a few of them between Friday and Monday, or between darkness and dawn.

But deep down somewhere, away from the eyes of the world and the thoughts of men, was a dream of what love must be like when it was really love. Mickey was wise enough to know that he hadn't yet tasted love. And so, as he left Lois Larribee, he was yearning to find that One Woman whom he had never seen and who would answer this question that Lois and little Anne had put into his heart.

Life is such a good stage manager, when she chooses. It was exactly at this moment that the saxophones

began to play a rag that was famous when ragging was permissible only in dives and places more unmentionable. It had been written by an entertainer out on San Francisco's Beach, and this negro orchestra knew how to play it. The banjo came through like the note of a tom-tom. The drum rolled in waves. And above them, the saxophones called their primitive, elemental song.

It caught the crowd instantly, and they surged to the windows—a crowd laughing now at anything, dizzy with wine and hilarious with excitement.

The French windows from the drawing-room and the dining-room had been flung open. A spotlight, glaring yellow, green, purple, plunged down into the patio. Expert hands had transformed it in seconds. It was no longer a garden about a fairy pond. It was the back room of a San Francisco den.

A man and a girl came swiftly from the shadows and stood poised, haughty and indifferent. They were not looking at the crowd. They were looking at each other.

Every one knew the man. Frisco was a Hollywood character. If he looked a trifle unusual, it was because of the tight-fitting checked suit and the brown derby. Also, he carried a cane.

Nobody knew the girl.

All they could see of her then was a startling mass of hair, hair like an autumn leaf, into which the gleaming spotlight poured. A white indefinite face, with narrow eyes that glinted greenly, and a round scarlet mouth. Under the cheap finery of an old black velvet dress, its skirt ending at the knees, its neck cut low,

her body was one liquid line of grace and budding promise.

Nameless. Unknown. Her breath came in labored gasps and her hands were rigid. Yet she dominated that crowd instantly. They could not take their eyes from her. That was the thing that was to make and unmake Sharon Kimm.

Whatever it was, beauty or sex appeal or genius or charm, Sharon Kimm had something that stopped the show every time. It grew beneath the spotlight, instead of fading or withering in its glare.

There were people in that crowd who knew how only exaggerated personality can survive the grayness of the screen. There were authorities, staring down from the French windows, who had proved that the neutrality of the silver sheet dims all except certain extravagant traits.

And several of them recognized that the girl who suddenly swept into Frisco's arms and began to dance had those traits.

"Walking the dog"—according to the method of the Barbary Coast. It wasn't exactly the introduction a girl might have chosen to a select crowd of film celebrities. But it served Sharon's purpose as nothing else might have done.

The guests stood fascinated, while the two figures whirled, dipped, soared, dropped.

The music stopped. They stood bowing. Frisco as expressionless as some Chinese idol. But the girl with the flame-colored hair, panting with excitement and fatigue, smiled and waved her hands and tossed back her head as she looked up at them.

Mickey Reid started to applaud as the riot of applause broke forth.

But he could not. His eyes had met the eyes of the girl who danced, met and held them. Strange, shy, hungry eyes.

His own dilated—angry, surprised. But he could not free them from hers.

Stunned, horrified, he tried to silence the whisper that was thrilling his heart until it sang in his breast.

Mickey Reid might scowl his hot young scowl, and tighten his cool young lips in disgust, and deny the beating of his heart all he dared.

It really didn't matter.

For Mickey Reid had met his One Woman.

CHAPTER VI

TWO things came into Sharon's life at the same time.

Success and Mickey Reid.

The day after the party Irving Kohl sent for her and engaged her to play a character bit in Nadine Allis's new picture.

And Mickey Reid invited her to dinner.

The character bit was a very small bit indeed. Just a dancing girl in a Paris brothel, sending her lover away to fight for France. But somehow, people went out of the theater, carrying that picture with them. And afterwards, when they heard the Marseillaise, they thought of the girl's face. That scene was the match that lighted the skyrocket of Sharon Kimm's success.

The dinner was a new and tingling experience and after it they danced the hours away in breathless laughter.

The race was between Mickey and that glittering success. Mickey, who could offer her young laughter and kisses and, somewhere, some day, a home and babies and work. And success, that offered to write her name in electric lights around the globe and to give into her reckless little hands the peculiar treasure of kings and to shower her with such flattery as has cost a queen her throne.

And neither Mickey nor Sharon would ever have

known what the outcome might have been if Ruby hadn't got drunk in the middle of a William Dvorak picture.

In the end, that year between Nadine Allis's party and the day that William Dvorak sent for Sharon was to be the most important of all the years of her life, and the memory of its moments was to be the one rope ready to her hand when she stood face to face with the girl in the Plaza.

There was a poker game in progress at the Lodge. There usually was. Mickey could hear the shuffle of cards and clatter of chips as he went by. But he didn't stop. He had other things to think about. For once, poker didn't suit his mood.

Now the Lodge is a Hollywood institution. And, like all institutions, there is much about it that is bad and a great deal that is good.

Not so many years ago, the Lodge was a respectable mansion, occupied by a family whose name was in the Social Register. It stood upon its corner of the Boulevard amid acres of flowers and trees, and a delicious, drowsy quiet pervaded everything. True, the street cars ran by once an hour, which was disturbing. And the high school was only one room over a grocery store. But, all things considered, it was a very satisfactory place for a Southern California estate. It blinked in sedate companionship at the brightly pink Italian villa across the street, which belonged to a famous painter who loved Hollywood for its flowers and its seclusion from the world.

Only a little more than a decade ago, that was. And

hardly anybody had ever heard of motion pictures. They were then, indeed, in their infancy.

But suddenly they were heard of. Next they had invaded Hollywood and begun to build, first small and then great, studios. And the ground upon which the pompous old mansion stood became worth almost as much per front foot as it had been worth per acre before.

And so it gave place to progress. The Lodge was moved gently but firmly into the background and its stained-glass door stared indignantly at a high brick wall, and its decorated cupolas dwindled into insignificance beneath the five stories of a business block erected where the marble fountain and the rose garden had once stood.

More than that, it became a dwelling-place for unregenerate young men of amazing vocabularies, who cared apparently for nothing in the world but motion pictures and making love. And since women were not admitted within its sacred portals, at least officially, these young men paraded between shower baths in all states of undress, kept ungodly hours, and knew more about all the world and his wife than they were ever to know again.

Life in Hollywood was a great gamble, besides being tremendous fun, and they were very happy.

Mickey Reid was the only actor who had ever been allowed to remain at the Lodge. To the end of the chapter, he was to consider that the prize compliment ever paid him.

Actors were simply not encouraged at the Lodge. Nothing was said about it. Nothing, likewise, could

prevent them from coming there if they desired. Only they never stayed long. There is a method in these things.

Mickey Reid was the shining exception. He not only remained, but—though they took pains not to let him know it—he was beyond question the most popular man there. And it wasn't only because he could play the piano—entirely by ear and not according to any known system, but sufficiently well to keep the Lodge supplied with its favorite jazz. Nor that he sang. He did sing. But it was his repertoire rather than his art that made him successful. Most of the songs he sang have never been published and it is to be hoped they never will be.

And when the gang tired of the old verses, they gathered about Mickey's battered piano and wrote new ones, to fit the Hollywood dirt of the moment.

They had, for example, evolved fifty-seven verses—by design—to Mr. Kipling's famous poem which begins, "I've taken my fun where I've found it," and ends with, "And I learned about women from her." The fifty-seven were possibly not up to the literary standard of Mr. Kipling's original creation, but they were pointed and pungent and would have astounded certain bright and shining stars of Hollywood who considered themselves people of importance. They also contained the life history of that Mademoiselle from Armentières, of whom the A. E. F. used to sing. In fact, they brought her to Hollywood, where her experiences were highly colorful.

They were all amazingly young, the inhabitants of the Lodge. They had come from the four corners of

the globe to seek their fortunes in Hollywood—the land of the new gold rush. And they worked as press agents and free-lance scenario writers, assistant directors and cameramen, gag men and art directors, cutters and technical experts. From their ranks had emerged some of the great men of the industry, and they confidently expected many more to follow. Therefore life was good and they could talk endless shop, love many women, play much poker and work harder than ditch diggers, all with a clear conscience.

The fire in Mickey Reid's high-ceilinged room had burned low. It was a pure affectation, anyway, that fire of Mickey's. His roommate, whose real name was written in Burke's Peerage but who through circumstances surrounding a last-card draw had earned the valued sobriquet of "Stud," called it a prop fire.

The windows were open on the brick passageway and the hum of the Boulevard came up faintly. The pointed leaves of a solitary palm were etched black against a hot blue sky, spangled with stars. And that scent of sage and eucalyptus and orange blossoms and hill earth and sea-foam, that is a part of every Hollywood night that ever was, came in and filled the big untidy room.

Mickey came in softly, because he was still thinking about the way Sharon's upper lip drew back from her teeth and remembering how very little she felt in his arms on the dance floor. He had never held her in his arms anywhere else. Mickey had been a bold wooer—until the One Woman came along.

Stud glanced up and went on sketching a green cathedral window with the only hand the Germans had

left him. You will find the history of that missing hand written in one of the real books on the war, a small tale of a platoon that did not get its orders to retire and therefore held its bit of trench near Ypres while the rest of the battalion fell back to safety.

"Well," he said at last, "well, my young Lochinvar, you're back from the wars, I see. Moreover, I observe the golden hair upon your coat sleeve which has been such a help to dramatists and vaudeville teams. 'Tis well, my son. A long life has taught me that there are only two things worth while in this world—women and fighting. Didn't somebody say that?"

"Probably," said Mickey. "It sounds like one of those things that get said every few years. Napoleon might have said it at Elba for all I know. Why aren't you playing poker like a Christian instead of pretending to be artistic at this hour of the night?"

"Because, my son, I have work to do. Great work. More than that, they sent me to the cleaners last night. One dollar and forty cents stands between me and starvation until next Wednesday."

"I'll——"

"No," said Stud, and he put his head back and squinted through one eye for the effect of the window, "you won't. It will be good for my soul. I have been altogether too prosperous since I got this steady job. I'm beginning to get soft and self-satisfied like a movie star. I shall lose my eye before long. Besides, I still have a few remnants of credit attached somewhat raggedly to my person."

Mickey went over to the window, caught by that blue sky, with the orange stars so close that you could al-

most reach out your hand and touch them. A night that looked hot and yet was impishly cool. By the window, he discovered another man, hidden in the big chair, his feet on the sill.

"Hello! I say," said Mickey Reid, "it's Rhiney. Back from the seven deserts. Back from the great open spaces where men are men. How's the greatest picture ever made progressin', young feller?"

The man in the chair grunted, without taking his pipe from between his teeth.

"Don't be rude, de-ah," said Mickey, grinning at him. "Didn't you confide to me, in a moment of alcoholic enthusiasm, that this was going to be the greatest production ever filmed? I merely ask."

"I did," said Rhiney sheepishly, "and you've given me plenty of cause to regret it. Hell, I don't know why it is that when you're working on a picture you get hooked with the idea it's so darned good. At that, some of this stuff 'll knock your eye out. We got 5,000 cattle in one stampede and it's going to be magnificent."

"Bah!" said Stud, selecting a black crayon and waving it loftily in the air. "What's the good of 5,000 cattle? The darn things always kick up so much dust you can't see anything. Personally, I hear you've got 300,000 feet of film and about half a reel of picture."

"That's a lie," said Rhiney calmly, "and by the way, I'd like to know how you know so much about cattle pictures. You're supposed to be an effete art director for designing boudoirs for ladies to sin in."

"Nice grammar," said Stud, bringing out the green window with a hard circle of black, "but I will pass that. I know something about everything, which is more than

can be said for most of you, who don't know anything but pictures and don't give a whoop. You have no perspective. Not a damn bit. That's what's the matter with motion pictures. It's silly. Some guy in the business office makes a hit with the boss the way he files correspondence and they decide he'd make a great director. What does he know about making pictures? Does he know how to buy a story? Does he know how to get a good continuity, or recognize it if he does get one? Does he know camera angles, art values, acting, drama—all the things you have to know? Certainly not. Is there any other business in the world where they turn over a job like directing a picture to an amateur—always remembering that it costs from thirty thousand to a million dollars to make a motion picture?

"I know you were a lot of silly asses to go pirooting down to Texas—of all places—to get stuff you could get better between here and San Diego. So does everybody else. Nothing in Texas looks as much like Texas is supposed to look as the Miller and Lux ranch, right in California. Besides, you can't make pictures in Texas or any place else because you can't get the immense amount of necessary technical equipment. These birds that write in all the time about beautiful scenery in the highest mountains of their state don't realize that it takes pretty near as much mechanical stuff to make a picture as it does to make an automobile. But this director of yours just used to be a shoe clerk till he married Mose's sister and he don't know anything. Consequently——"

"Well," said Rhiney bitterly, "I don't own the Allied Artists, do I? I can't stop 'em, can I? Didn't I tell

'em? I should 'a' directed the picture. But no, they import some guy from New Jersey to make a western super-special and I'm just the poor boob that goes along to take care of a lot of cowboys and extra girls, and get the cattle and find the locations and see there's plenty of grub for everybody, and help put up the tents. That's all. The natives were just as friendly and hospitable as a lot of Gila monsters and I've been ten weeks in a hell like that and come home and you tell me about it."

Mickey had gone to the piano and he began to play—tricky jazz chords, that melted into one another in a way that did something to his nerves. After all, what did these things matter? His eyes were upon the skyline outside his window—the low, broken skyline. He was part of it—the Hollywood night. Behind those curtained windows, he could imagine a thousand love stories whispered. Old secrets made new. And he was part of it.

He shut his eyes and the flame of autumn-leaf hair that had been so close to him as they danced came out of the blackness.

"All right, all right," Stud's voice went on, somewhere in the distance, "we're all agreed. She spent thirty thousand bucks on a big ballroom set—I spent days working on it and it was a lulu—and then they snip the whole thing out and leave it laying on the cutting-room floor."

Mickey's hands crashed in a chord. The cutting room. The red flag to the whole Lodge, to the whole industry. The little dark room where they took the film, the thousands upon thousands of feet of film that

had been shot, and selected the seven or eight thousand feet of it to make the finished picture. The room with its long tables, and wheels of film and endless giant scissors, and the cement floor always littered with narrow, shining, black ribbons of film that have been consigned forever to oblivion.

"Well," said Mickey, to the accompaniment of seductive blues, "I did a whole picture as leading man a while ago and when they released it there wasn't even a long shot of me in it. Let's do a little ballad entitled, 'The Face on the Cutting-Room Floor.'"

He struck a preliminary chord and with a running fire of helpful suggestions from his audience, sang:

"Ambition lured me onward,
But I'll trust it nevermore.
It broke my heart and made me
Just a face on the cutting-room floor.

"I gave my all, my all-in-all,
My heart is very sore.
'Cause all I got in exchange for it
Was my face on the cutting-room floor.

"I thought to be a wondrous star
Whom millions would adore.
How can they learn to love me
With my face on the cutting-room floor?"

They went into roars of laughter over it and Mickey sang it again in profane imitation of a certain ingénue who had asked him to kiss her at a dance one night and cut him dead on the Boulevard the next day.

There was much more conversation, all in the same vein. They always talked pictures. A record of the

conversation for a week wouldn't have betrayed a thousand words on any other subject. But that wasn't peculiar to the Lodge. Hollywood in general is afflicted in the same way.

Some of the poker players drifted in. But Mickey had gone back to the piano and was feeling among the keys for something to answer the longing in his heart.

He found it.

There was a pause, a startled pause, in the room behind him. Stud took up a purple crayon with a reflective air and Rhiney removed his feet from the window-sill, that he might turn and gaze.

"Heavens!" said a drawling voice in the doorway. "Mickey's playing 'Roses of Picardy.'"

"He's in love," said Stud casually. "He'll be playing 'Love Me and the World Is Mine' in a minute."

"Is he really in love?" said Rhiney. They talked as though they had forgotten Mickey's presence, but as a matter of fact every eye was upon the fine shoulders bent above the keys. "Who is she?"

"A red-headed extra girl with green eyes who buys her clothes from the Savage comedy wardrobe, I should judge. I can conceive no other place where they could be procured."

Mickey was turning scarlet behind the ears, but he dared not speak. It was the unwritten law. Unless you were actually in love, the marrying, forever-and-ever kind of love, you must take their gags, or they'd nail you to the cross.

"Don't tell me our Mickey is throwing away his talents upon a red-headed extra girl," went on the drawling voice in well-simulated astonishment. "How does he

ever expect to be a star if he carries on so? If I was a handsome, dark-eyed leading man, instead of a scenario writer with a receding chin and a weak chest, I'd be a regular Shylock. I'd trade my kisses and the beams of my eye for a nice contract or a fat part or two. It has been done. Don't tell me Mickey is wasting himself upon an extra girl."

Mickey went on playing:

"Roses will die in the summer-time,
When our paths may be far apart."

If he stopped now they would only rag him worse. They'd think they had captured his goat and would act accordingly.

"What's her name?" asked Rhiney. "I haven't associated with anything but sand and rattlesnakes in so long I don't know a thing about who's kissing who any more."

"Her name," said Stud, blocking in purple velvet curtains with a deft touch, "is Sharon Kimm, I believe, and——"

"Don't," said Mickey Reid. And he knew that in that one word he had gone on record.

He got up from the piano stool and stood looking at them. His eyes were bright with defiance, but there was a wistful droop to the corner of his smile. "I say—I'd a little rather you didn't rag about Sharon. That's the way it is, you see."

And he went out, whistling "Roses of Picardy" between his teeth.

"Why," said the drawling voice, "he means it!"

"I told you so," said Stud, imperturbably. "He's

only a man after all. It comes to every one sooner or later. Heaven help us."

"What's she like, really?" Rhiney had actually let his pipe go out.

"Between you and me," said Stud, and he smiled, but his heart was rather sick, because he loved Mickey more than any man he had ever known, "she's a poor little guttersnipe, and she wears her clothes like somebody stood across the room and threw them at her; but I'm afraid she's the kind of a girl men remember."

CHAPTER VII

THE telephone rang. Every time it rang nowadays, Sharon's heart leaped. It might be either Mickey or work.

Since the night of Nadine's party, work had been on speaking terms with Sharon Kimm once more. The bit in Nadine's production, which came just in time to avert the financial crash due to come after the passing of the four dollars and eighty-five cents with which they had faced the world when Sharon lost her job at Savage's, had been followed by fairly steady extra work in the Kohl productions.

As for Mickey—he certainly wasn't afraid of using a telephone, as Sharon remarked to Lucia with a grin.

This time it was Mickey.

"Hello!" he said, and the way he said it made her smile. "It's Sunday."

"Why," said Sharon, giggling into the mouthpiece, "so it is."

"The sun's shining," said the boy's voice, half tender, half laughing.

"My goodness!" said Sharon. "I believe you're right."

"Let's go beach-combing," begged the voice.

"Let's," said Sharon Kimm.

She had, only a few days before, bought herself a new dress. Eleven-seventy-five, at the Broadway store. It

was an extravagance. She didn't need Lucia to tell her that.

"A few dollars," said Lucia, when Sharon brought it home under her arm, "and you're nigger-rich. Just because you've had nineteen days' work in the last six weeks you think you're set."

"Aw, Lucia," said Sharon Kimm, "I was a sight. Everything's all right now."

On anybody but Sharon, the dress would have been worse than it was. There should be a law against putting bows in some of the places those bows occupied. They broke every liquid line in the wrong place.

And a new hat. The hat itself may not have been so bad, though there were at least seven too many flowers on it, but it sat at exactly the wrong angle on Sharon's heavy hair. And Sharon hadn't yet learned the importance of keeping her stockings smooth around her ankles and the seams perfectly straight up the back of her exquisite little legs.

Nevertheless, she looked at herself in the bathroom mirror and was satisfied. That dress and hat spelled elegance to Sharon Kimm. She had no idea that she looked like a badly dressed shop-girl out for a holiday.

"I'm going to the beach with Mickey," she said to Lucia—Lucia, sunk in study at her rickety desk, a jelly-glass full of pencils at her elbow and a stack of gray paper before her.

There was no answer. Sharon looked at her and laughed.

"Hey, Miss Lucia Morgan, ahoy!" she shouted through the megaphone of her hands. "Come out of it and listen."

Lucia looked up blushing along the line of her smooth cheek.

"I've got it," she said. "It's beginning to move. I thought it never would. Why, I can see it!"

"Swell," said Sharon, and kissed her. "I said I'm going to the beach with Mickey Reid and I'll be back when I get here."

Lucia looked up, suddenly serious. Then, "Sharon, are you in love with that boy?"

Sharon giggled. "Now, Lute," she said, "you know about how apt I am to fall in love. Don't be silly. But he's nice. Not fresh. Besides, he—you know, Lute, he's a gentleman. He's learned—taught me a lot. He's a nice boy, that's all."

"He's more than just a nice boy," said Lucia, softly. "He's fine and clean and kind. You know, honey, you mustn't play with him. It's not fair."

Sharon's eyes shone greenly. "Pooh!" she said, her face hard. "Pooh—men! They can darn well look after themselves, my girl. I should begin to worry about men. With what I know!"

"Some men are different," said Lucia bravely. "You've known the wrong kind. If Mickey loves you, he'll want to marry you."

The green eyes narrowed. "I don't want to get married," she said sullenly. "I wouldn't marry anybody. Marriage is the bunk. Anyway, Mickey has got his way to make, just like I have. I'm not going to tie myself down to some man and have kids and all that. I want to be a star and have money and beautiful things and diamonds and dresses and be somebody."

"All right," said Lucia, "but that isn't the way I

look at things. I don't believe you do either, down in your heart. Anyway, don't you forget that Mickey Reid is different from the men you're talking about."

"Lute, you're a sentimental idiot," said Sharon. "Don't *you* fall for his brown eyes, will you?"

After Sharon had gone Lucia sat for a long time, looking into space and wondering. She knew Sharon so well, so well. She had known Sharon's mother. There was a recklessness in Sharon that frightened Lucia a little.

What would success do to Sharon, if it came?

What would a great deal of money mean to little Sharon Kimm from down by the tracks? But most of all, how would her starved soul respond to the admiration and the flattery, if they became part of her life?

It would be like wine upon an empty stomach. It would be like the pinnacle of some dizzy height to one who had lived always in the valley.

And Lucia forgot her story and almost prayed that success might not come. Almost. But that, if it did, Sharon might somehow be given strength to be sane and strong and fine in the flood of it.

Lucia distrusted Hollywood.

Mickey Reid had his first premonition of what was to come to Sharon when he saw her walking down the beach toward him in her rented bathing-suit.

He was conscious that she had that poster quality of beauty that lends itself to twenty-four sheets. And she never looked twice the same. She wouldn't, in endless close-ups and countless repetitions of the same part, pall upon the public as quickly as most women.

Today, for instance, she looked impish and gay and

oddly young. She might have been a schoolgirl, truant for an afternoon lark. Her startling hair, that always had a wicked look, was hidden under a black silk handkerchief which gave her face a demure expression. Her eyes were sea-blue and her round red mouth seemed shy and innocently happy.

And yet only last night she had been a melting thing, and her eyes had been that shade of gray that has so much violet in it and her lips had been set in a tormenting, unsmiling circle. He had wanted to kiss her very much, last night. But some unaccountable delicacy held him back. He sensed her fear, her antagonism—not to him but to kisses. Everything might depend upon that first kiss.

"I don't know why I put on a bathing-suit," she said, as she dropped to the sand beside him. "I've never been in Mr. Pacific's old ocean yet and I certainly don't intend to begin now. I'm one of those bathing-girls who never got her suit wet in her life. I'm scared of the ocean. It looks so big."

Mickey laughed at her. He had turned on his stomach and lay looking up at her, where she sat with feet doubled under her like a Turk and her eyes on the tumbling waves.

"I'm going to throw you in before the day's over," he said, his eyes teasing her. "Throw you right out to the sharks. What good are you, anyway?"

"You and who else is going to throw me to the sharks?" said Sharon Kimm. "You men are so conceited. If there's anything I can't stand it's the swell-head. Honestly, I wonder you can find it in your heart to speak to a poor girl at all."

"I'm not a bit proud," said Mickey. "I'll speak to you any place. But I'm sure going to see that you get wet."

"Are you just doing your stuff?" said Sharon indignantly. "Lay off that. Don't you know cavemen are out of date? You've got to be a sleek-haired love-hound and kiss the ladies' hands if you expect to get anywhere as a sheik nowadays."

He took her hand, where it supported her on the sand, and turned it palm up in his own. A delicious hand, slim and expressive. Not particularly well cared for—Sharon did her own manicuring with Lucia's work scissors—but one suggestive of all the poetry that has ever been written to a lady's finger-tips.

Mickey looked down at its ringless perfection a moment and then he kissed it.

Now he had meant to kiss the little hand lightly, gently, a sort of mocking kiss that would go with the summer day, and the bright-colored parasols that grew on the white sands like fantastic giant mushrooms, and the blue ocean glinting merrily in the sun. A summer kiss. A mere promise of a kiss, to match the laughter all around them. A kiss set to the jazz strum of that distant ukulele.

It should have been a gay kiss, because the beach in front of the Swimming Club was very gay with pretty girls in flower-garden gowns and men in flannels and girls and men in every sort of bright bathing-suit the world had ever known.

But his lips betrayed him shamelessly. For once they had touched the soft little palm, still warm from the sand, they clung there desperately. He crushed it

against his mouth as though in it he might find healing for this restless passion that consumed him.

That was the odd thing about Sharon Kimm. She never seemed to satisfy the passion she aroused. It burned a steady fire for years. Which is not the way of passion as a rule.

"Don't do that," she said, when he let her hand go at last. Her breast was rising in quick anger and her face was white. "Don't you ever do that again!"

She did not quite understand why she was so angry—angry enough to make her heart beat hard and her breath come fast in her throat. After all, he had only kissed her hand. Sharon was not a prude. She needn't be so angry about it as all that.

But Mickey hadn't lived in Hollywood for nothing. He had had plenty of practice in that quick shifting of ground, that ready laughter, that makes light of everything, which is supposed to be the correct manner of handling all difficult situations.

Now that the touch of her hand was gone from his mouth, he could pull himself together.

"Mustn't even kiss your hand?" said Mickey pathetically. "All right. But even a queen allows her hand to be kissed. Don't be so stingy. I assure you my intentions aren't serious."

But Sharon was not particularly pleased with that either. "Oh, aren't they?" she said. "Well, that's a very good thing, because I'm never serious about men."

"Not even about love?" said Mickey softly.

"I don't know anything about love," said Sharon Kimm, "and I don't want to. I don't believe in love. It's a lot of bunk."

"That's because you don't know anything about it," said Mickey, looking straight into her eyes.

"I know what people call love," said Sharon darkly. "You bet I do. Well, I'm not going to have anything to do with that, I tell you. It makes all the trouble in this world. It's horrid."

"Oh, no, dear!" said Mickey breathlessly. "Oh, no! Don't be afraid of it, Sharon. It's the loveliest thing in the world. It means—protection for a woman and inspiration for a man. It means companionship. It means everything is more beautiful because there are two of you and anything is less dreadful for just the same reason. It's the beginning of life, and the meaning of it, and the end of it. It's the only thing that really matters. Haven't you ever been in love?"

The sea-blue eyes dropped. Then they looked at him, sidewise, under satin lids and dark lashes. The age-old look. The come-hither look. The promise that Eve offered to Adam with the apple. Sharon used it unconsciously, because it had been born in her, because it was part of her, and always would be. And because Mickey's voice had something in it that she knew not how else to answer.

"Don't you ask a lot of questions?" said Sharon Kimm. "What do you want to know for?"

"Well, I just hate to think of a poor girl growing up and not being in love at least once," said Mickey. "I'd like to remedy such an oversight as that for you."

"I've never been in love," said Sharon, just a shade wistfully; then her voice grew belligerent, and she added, "But it ain't worrying me."

"That's because you don't know——" Mickey moved

closer to her in the sand, so that his cheek was almost against her knee, "—that's because you don't know what it would be like to sit in the moonlight, side by side, and feel as though the whole world belonged to us two. That's because you don't understand what a kiss can be like, a real kiss, in the dark, where there's nothing but a moon and the flowers and the wind in the trees making love songs. Haven't you ever been kissed, either?"

This time Sharon knew that she was not angry. But she still did not know what it was that stopped her voice and left her powerless to answer him as she desired.

"You need to be kissed," said Mickey. "You need to be loved and taken care of. Then you'd forget to be afraid. Do you think I'd ever hurt you?"

She shook her head. There was nothing in this boy's tender eyes, nor upon his clean lips, that was in any way to be confused with the ghost-man of her childhood, or with other men she had met since.

"You're not afraid of me, Sharon, are you? I don't want you to be, ever. I'm not much, but no matter what happens to you, or where you are, I want you always to know that I love you and I'd do anything in the world for you. I don't exactly know why I love you the way I do. At first it made me angry with myself. But—I know now that we were meant for each other from the foundation of the world. That's all."

The group of flappers and their beaux under the adjoining umbrella, tumbling about on the sand like puppies, began to sing again, to the strums of the ukulele, played by a sixteen-year-old beauty with freckles on

her nose. Their voices blended, vibrant, young voices.
And they were singing:

"Roses are shining in Picardy,
In the hush of the morning dew.
Roses are flowering in Picardy,
But there's never a rose like you.
Roses must die with the summer-time,
When our paths may be far apart.
But there's one rose that dies not—in Picardy.
That's the rose that I wear in my heart."

A boy's pure tenor soared and held the notes like threads of silver—a boy's voice with something of the quality of a John McCormack love-song.

"But there's never a rose like you," said Mickey Reid, and he laid his cheek against Sharon's knee.

"Ki-yi-yi-yi," yelled a voice, "Mickey Reid, ahoy! Mickey Reid wanted at the box-office. Mr. Reid! Young Michael Reid! First Baseman Reid!"

Mickey's eyes went black with anger. In his heart he damned that interruption as he had never damned anything before in his life.

But he sat up and answered it.

"Hi!" said the owner of the voice and a young giant, bronzed to a deep oaken shade, with hair burned tow, trotted around their umbrella. "We're going to warm up, young First Baseman Reid. Kindly come out from under yon sunshade and lend us your undivided attention. For it has now become our painful duty to lick the eternal stuffings out of this bunch of guys from the Beach Club who have a misguided notion that they can play baseball."

Mickey grinned. After all, the day was young. The

evening lay beyond. Even a man much in love may enjoy a Sunday afternoon game of baseball, particularly when he knows he plays well and his girl is watching.

"Come on," he said to Sharon. "You sit on the sidelines and watch."

The occupants of the beach had gathered in a diamond around the sand field. A troop in bathing-suits and gaudy bathrobes came around the corner of the adjoining club-house. A gang of kids began to crawl to the top of the green lattice fence that shut them in from the road.

Sharon, a small, quiet figure, watched it all with dreamy eyes. She felt just a little bit out of it, but she was tremendously thrilled just the same.

There were a dozen famous stars divided between the two ball teams. The pitcher on Mickey's team was Stanley Craig, a reigning matinee idol only a few years out of college. He still wore the giant blue letter of his varsity upon his sweater. The man at the bat was the latest sheik discovery—almost as dark in his swimming togs as the Hawaiian swimming champion catching behind him. A pretty screen flapper behind Sharon referred wittily to the extreme bow-legs revealed by the abbreviated bathing-suit of the most prominent of Western stars, ambling nervously about third base. And it was early discernible that Charles Wellington, out in right field, was allowed to play only because he was Charles Wellington and for no reason in any way connected with baseball.

On the sidelines, conversation was general. Sharon Kimm's throat burned a little as she listened. Every-

body knew everybody else. Jokes and insults flew back and forth. Half a dozen girls, trained by life to the business of entertaining, sent the crowd into roars of laughter with a selection of those personal sallies of which they were past mistresses. Shocking things, some of these, though irresistibly funny because of their young and innocent faces. There was a friendly family feeling about the whole thing.

Sharon wondered if she would ever be part of it; if they would ever congregate about her beach chair, ever laugh at everything she said whether it was funny or not, ever defer to her opinion whether she knew what she was talking about or not. She hoped so.

Just then the crowd parted a little and Sharon saw Nadine Allis coming toward her. There are few women who can look queenly in a bathing-suit. Nadine Allis was one of them. On her golden hair she wore a blue rubber hat with a white frill and a white lacing under her pretty chin. Her bathing-suit was of heavy, figured, blue silk, with tiny sleeves and a white kid belt about her hips. She wore blue silk socks and laced shoes and her white knees were dimpled. From her shoulders hung a pale-blue cape, with a flaring collar of white angora.

She settled herself, with an eager laugh, in the place that had been prepared for her. Somebody unfurled the blue silk parasol she carried and she flung it back, making a frame of its silk for her face. Her enthusiasm matched the day. All eyes turned upon her for a moment, and she was graciously conscious of it. Then they went back to the ball game.

An instant later Sharon heard her name called.

"Come over here," said Nadine Allis. "Irv wants to talk to you."

But apparently Irv did not. If he did, he concealed his desire with great skill. For when she came—a trifle shyly and awkwardly—he merely grunted and went on watching young Mickey Reid, who had just knocked a home run and was being wildly applauded. Sharon turned and watched him, too, and she felt again that tingling sensation she had at first taken for anger.

When she turned back to Irv Kohl, he sat silent among the people who gathered about Nadine, all talking at once and all laughing violently at their own jokes. He and Sharon, who still felt self-conscious and forlorn, were the only quiet people in the group.

One of the girls, a slim minx in a startling suit of orange jersey, rallied him about it.

"Irv," she said, contemplating him with malicious eyes, "the trouble with you is that you talk too much. You do, really. You presume upon the fact that you are a producer and most of us poor actors have to treat you decent if we want a job. So you just sit around boring everybody to death with your chatter. If it wasn't for your wife, nobody'd stand for it."

Sharon marveled at the easy impudence of her. She wished she could be at home with celebrities like that, could say calm and witty things before them. Everybody was laughing at the girl in orange, including Nadine. Sharon glanced out of the corners of her eyes at Irv Kohl. He was laughing, too, but it occurred to Sharon that he was laughing only because he had to and that he didn't like it very well.

Perhaps Irv Kohl couldn't take a joke on himself.

Mickey came back, hot and elated. After greetings—it never made any difference to Mickey whether he knew the people or not, or whether they were great or entirely unimportant—he pulled Sharon up by both hands.

“After that I’ve got to have a swim,” he said, smoothing back the hair that was standing up in wildest confusion all over his head. The sight of that rumpled hair, thick and just a little curly around his neck and ears, gave Sharon a sudden emotion. She wanted to smooth it down with her two hands, feel it beneath her fingers.

As she turned to follow, Irv Kohl said impersonally: “Better come see me tomorrow. I’d like to talk to you.”

Sharon nodded shyly, conscious of eyes turned in her direction with a new interest, hardly able to keep from dancing away across the sands.

As they went away, those two young things hand in hand, Nadine Allis followed them with her eyes. She had taken rather a fancy to Sharon. There was something real about the child. And that ridiculous story of Mildred Rideout’s hadn’t affected Nadine in the least.

As a matter of fact Mildred Rideout could hardly have selected a tougher audience than Nadine. Oh, she told the thing cleverly enough, apparently without malice or design, merely as an illustration of the lengths to which these picture-mad girls were willing to go! But Nadine Allis was not a fool for all her blue eyes and her curls. She saw through the thing as plainly as if it had been written on a blackboard.

Moreover, Nadine detested Aaron Savage and, though she conceded much that was fine in Mildred, much that was pitiful, she could never quite approve of her. Woman of the world as she had become, there was still in Nadine a decorous—almost prudish—strain. She desired that the proprieties should be preserved in all things, outwardly at least.

She had *married* Irv Kohl.

Besides, she had a certain arrogance regarding her position. No one could dictate to her. Sharon Kimm might be blacklisted by every one else in Hollywood. She—Nadine Allis—would refuse to follow the sheep, would investigate and judge for herself and do exactly as she thought right in the matter.

"You going to give her a contract, papa?" she said.

"I might," said Irv Kohl cautiously. "Looks like she might develop into a good bet."

"*He* looks like he might be a great bet." Nadine Allis, whose eyes had not been upon Sharon, tipped her head toward Mickey Reid.

Irv Kohl's quick black eyes followed her gesture. For a moment he watched the brown body, fashioned with such a free grace, and the dark head held so proudly. Then he glanced sidewise, the flicker of a glance, at his wife.

"No, I ain't interested," he said.

Irv Kohl had no men stars and Nadine changed her leading man with every picture.

"Besides," he now added, "Reid signed a three-year contract with Allied Artists yesterday. I think he was a fool, but what can you expect from an actor?"

"How in the world did you know that?" asked Nadine.

She turned to him smiling. It was a lovely smile. But the girl in the orange bathing-suit was suddenly conscious of a strange thing. There was no difference between the smile Nadine gave her husband, and the smile she gave little Sharon Kimm, and the smile she gave the boy who brought her sun umbrella. It wasn't a shallow smile, exactly. It was only gentle and comprehensive.

The girl in the orange bathing-suit made a swift deduction and then she looked at Irv Kohl speculatively. She herself had smiled upon many men, and she knew something of smiles. It occurred to her that a man whose wife smiled at him in just that way might be a little cold and lonely.

"You know everything," said Nadine, and she gave his arm a friendly pat.

When she saw the man's eyes under the careless caress, the girl in the orange changed her mind and, getting up with a yawn, departed for more profitable fields.

"Now I'm not going in," said Sharon belligerently, pulling back as they neared the water's edge. Her eyes were the color of the little green waves that rippled on the sand.

"Oh, yes, you are!" said Mickey. "It's so hot. It'll make you feel great. I won't let you get hurt. Be game, darling."

One of the things upon which Sharon prided herself—and she had more than her share of a bitter, defiant pride—was that she was game. There had been times in her life when it took every ounce of strength in her to go on being game. So far she'd managed it.

So she gave Mickey Reid a scornful look and went. When the water touched her toes and whirled about her ankles, she gave a gasp. But she did not falter.

"It's cold— isn't it?" she said, as a child might have said it.

The roundness of her mouth and the question in her upturned eyes made Mickey Reid suddenly tender. "You darling!" he said. "Don't be afraid."

She wasn't. Unexpectedly, she was thrilled. The feel of the water, colder than any she had ever felt, gave her an amazing exaltation. Looking straight ahead, she could see nothing but miles and miles of green water. She liked that too. And so she plunged on into it, until it covered her up to her slim shoulders.

"Like it?" said Mickey delightedly.

She had started to nod when the wave caught her—one of those big foaming waves that break with a roar like thunder. Mickey had taken his eyes off the ocean to fasten them upon Sharon's face and the wave had come, as such waves do, from nowhere in particular.

Sharon could only remember being buried in the cold salt water, feeling it pack itself tight, tight, about her face, her throat, her breast. The handkerchief was dragged from her hair and she felt it caught by the water and swept across her eyes in a cloud, then drawn out to its full length behind her. She remembered the feel of the hard sand, rubbing against her legs, as she went down, and the sting of the salt in her eyes, and ripples, like strong, cold hands, caressing her tingling body.

And then, part of it all, part of the glorious sensation, Mickey's frantic hands clutching her, steadying

her, holding her safe at last. They shot up together, and he caught her in his arms, pressing her close against him. And when they stood upright again, in the rich, hot sunshine, breast to breast in the white-frosted ocean, he kissed her.

She was not afraid. She had never been afraid. She was not afraid of Mickey, either, nor of his kiss. It was all part of the thrill, the clean, magnificent thrill of the ocean, and the sunshine, and the summer day. As long as she lived, Sharon would never smell the salt wine of the sea, nor feel the impact of it against her body, without remembering that first kiss.

And in the evening, sitting beneath the awning of the club veranda, with the night wind blowing in their faces and the slimmest crescent of a moon outlining the Pali-sades and the long line of the Malibu, black and purple and violet-gray and seal-brown in the shadows, they celebrated Mickey's new contract.

Mickey was pretty happy about that contract. Not much money, perhaps, as salaries went. But Mickey didn't care anything about money. It was always his last consideration. He was young. This was only the beginning of things, and a very good beginning, too.

He did not know then that the three-year contract they celebrated so gaily that night was to be the most terrible misfortune of his life, and that he had sold himself into slavery where he must toil, bound hand and foot, while they dragged his love away to the worship of the golden calf and all but sacrificed her soul upon its altars.

But those things will happen, now and again, in Hollywood.

CHAPTER VIII

YOU think then maybe you can work hard if I give you a little contract—maybe one year—seventy-five dollars a week?”

Irv Kohl paused in the midst of his speech to light his cigar, and so he missed the almost frightened dilatation of Sharon Kimm's eyes.

“Seventy-five dollars a week?” said Sharon Kimm, slowly. “Is—is that all right?”

“I guess it do to start you off,” said Irv Kohl. “If you need more after while and I like your work, you come and see me. Now you better go see the casting director. Maybe he start you to work right away.”

There was little about poverty that Sharon Kimm did not know. There was little about the sordid make-shifts and the thousand uglinesses of a hand-to-mouth existence that was not as familiar to her as the breath she drew. Her hand had always held an empty purse, her ear been attuned to the howl of the wolf outside her door.

It hadn't been difficult for her to deny herself everything, because she had nothing and she never had had anything, and there was a pretty good chance that she never would have anything. Sharon Kimm was neither a whiner nor a quitter. There was that to be said for her. And so she had borne poverty rather gallantly.

Prosperity was not to be so easy.

It seldom is. There are so many people who are nicer when they are down than when they are up. And there are players in the game of life who lose with a stiff upper lip but who do not understand the art of winning.

Sudden riches have been known to make criminals and crooks and liars and fools more quickly than penury. Couple those sudden riches with fame, with flattery, and it is a draught intoxicating to the coolest head.

When Lucia came in later that evening, she found Sharon trying to figure out, without any great success, what seventy-five dollars a week for a year meant in actual silver dollars. Sharon had always hated mathematics. Her schooling as a whole had been brief and spasmodic—she was a lawless child and learned well only those things that interested her—and she had never grasped the import of the multiplication table.

The teacher who had, in the third grade, tried valiantly to instil into her some of the rudiments of arithmetic had given up in despair.

"You just *won't* learn, Sharon," she said almost hysterically at the end of a very imperfect day; "you just won't try to learn."

The child Sharon had regarded her with bright puzzled eyes. "Oh, yes, I will!" she said. "Only my head begins to buzz inside when you talk about figures. It don't make no sense. I don't see no use in it, anyway. When I do it, it comes out all wrong."

It still did. Lucia, peering over her shoulder, found that when she multiplied seventy-five by fifty-two she got everything from three hundred and ninety-seven to thirty-six thousand, six hundred and forty.

But when Lucia got the correct answer for her, it meant little.

The only thing she grasped was that it was a great deal of money and it was hers. The thought started within her a raging fire of desire, a small blaze that was to be fed continually with the tinsel of Hollywood success.

She could begin now, with seventy-five dollars every week, to have those things which had dazzled her eyes when she and her mother pressed their noses against the show-windows of the department stores.

Self-control and self-denial had been a necessary part of her daily existence. But that self-control and that self-denial were like the virtue of an ugly woman—they had never been tried by fire.

Now self-indulgence and luxury began their siren song in her young ears. She was feverishly happy. Her dormant imagination was awakened by exquisite new visions.

She sat regarding the total figure Lucia had made, and then she said, "Now we're going to start living, Lute."

The next day Sharon Kimm went out and contracted to spend nearly her whole year's salary. It wasn't difficult.

First of all, there was the year's lease on the new and glistening bungalow court which she and Lucia had coveted from afar—hopelessly. That was nine hundred dollars, first and last months in advance.

Even when they had moved in, they could scarcely believe it—used to tiptoe from room to room, meeting each other at unexpected corners, and bursting with

giggles. The furniture in the parlor was mahogany—at least half an inch of it—and there was a blue lamp with gilt tassels on a stand by the window, and a fireplace all of bright green tile.

And a pure white bathtub—not very large to be sure—but then, Sharon wasn't very large either.

It worried Lucia a good deal when she found that in Hollywood you had to pay for your own lights and gas and telephone and maid service, in a bungalow court. But Sharon only laughed.

Then, of course, Sharon bought an automobile.

In the beginning she had expected to save her money, week by week, to buy that coveted treasure. But the salesman who appeared so miraculously to sell it to her explained that she didn't need to wait. Instead of depositing the money in the savings-bank, she would simply make monthly payments to the automobile company. She didn't have to pay it all at once. It sounded very easy that way. She could be driving the car all the time—right from that very day.

Likewise Sharon bought clothes, which were more remarkable for quantity than quality.

When the first six months of her contract was up, and Lucia stopped to take stock of many things, she sat rather white and trembling before the vast change in their lives.

And when she added up the ledger and found the debts that stared them in the face—in spite of that miraculous seventy-five dollars a week and her own salary—she was ready to weep.

Not Sharon Kimm. She had the confidence of the victorious. This magical Hollywood that had given

her so much, would it not give her still more? Anything—everything—she wanted?

"I'll fix it," she said.

The next day she came home bubbling with delight.

"Old fuss-budget," she said, "I just naturally went to Irv Kohl and I told him the Hoover people had made me an offer, and I told him he said he'd give me more money if I needed it and had been good, so he said he'd give me a hundred and a quarter right away. Not so bad, what?"

But even as she said it her voice dropped to an awed whisper. "A hundred and twenty-five dollars a week, Lute," she said, "I—can't——"

Oddly enough, she began to cry.

A hundred and twenty-five dollars a week was more than any one could spend.

It is interesting to know, looking over the history of Sharon Kimm, that at that very moment the great William Dvorak, sitting in the projection room, was seeing Sharon Kimm upon the screen for the first time.

He had sent for one of Nadine Allis's pictures to see the work of a new leading man Kohl had brought on from New York. He did not like the leading man. An affected poseur, without any more real sex than the keeper of a harem gate.

But his eyes dilated suddenly, and his head went forward, when he saw a little figure, with a mop of heavy hair that seemed to defy the black-and-white screen and to sparkle with color, dash on for the briefest of scenes. Unpleasant scenes they were, too. And a nasty, jealous, biting cat of a creature, her slanting eyes blazing, her mouth parted in a treacherous smile.

"Find out for me," he said to his scenario writer, "who the girl is who played the jealous sister."

But the scenario writer was a woman and she had her own reasons for forgetting to find out the name of the girl who had played that jealous sister, or any other girl who played any other part, for that matter.

And it was six months before Dvorak, maker of stars, was reminded of the girl again.

CHAPTER IX

PEPPER O'MALLEY ascended the bootblack stand at the Hirt Studio and thrust out her short foot in its scarlet slipper for the ministrations of Alfred—Alfred of the ebony hue and the ivory smile, who had shined more famous shoes than any other man in the world and could tell enough to hang at least two men, if he ever lost his temper.

Now on the Hirt lot that shoe-shining stand, with its six straight-backed chairs, is in the nature of a reviewing stand. From its elevation can be seen everything there is to see on the most important lot in Hollywood. The doors of the casting office and the publicity department, the main entrance with its swinging gates, the rickety steps to the wardrobe building and the dozen gray doors of the executive offices, all face upon a gravel walk that runs directly before the six chairs. On the right, the huge dressing-room buildings look exactly like stone warehouses and behind them the stages, canvas-walled and glass-roofed, tower gray and dirty and mysterious.

Walking through those stages, unbelievably crowded and noisy, you would have seen a dozen companies, with a dozen stars, at the daily grind of making pictures, in a dozen different sets ranging, in their two-sided illusion for the camera's eye, from gorgeous ballrooms to east-side tenements. Here and there a set incased

with black cloth, where a temperamental star who cannot stand the public eye was working. You would have heard the continual hammering of carpenters, the hum of music, the occasional shout of an excited director, the yell of the head electrician ordering his crew on the lights to "Kill 'em," or "Hit her with that baby spot." Seemingly hopeless confusion.

Its location was one reason why Alfred's shoe-shining stand did such a good business. An actor seeking a job had been known to have his shoes shined ten times in one morning, meanwhile keeping an eager eye upon the other actors who passed in and out of the casting director's fatal door. Girls with unusual feet and ankles always found excuse for sitting in Alfred's chairs, where their best points were visible to any all-powerful eye that might glance through one of the important doors.

It has been said that there is more dirt dished on the Hirt bootblack stand than anywhere else in Hollywood. This is not necessarily true, but at least one reporter takes it seriously enough to make the stand part of his daily beat.

Pepper O'Malley, having planted both feet firmly, cocked a wise and curious black eye at Alfred and said, "Well, what's all the shooting about?"

Alfred knew Miss O'Malley well for a matter of ten years more or less. He could even remember when Stanley Craig, not then a matinee idol of course, had liked her rather better than well for a brief period. Well, Alfred liked Miss O'Malley, but he was a discreet soul. Not much that went on around that lot escaped him. But he had never been known to blab, even to enhance his own glory down on Central Avenue.

"Shooting?" he repeated, studying the scarlet shoes with expert eye. "Now, look here, Miss O'Malley, don't you start shooting around this here lot. We been right peaceful around here lately and I for one says let it continue. That's what *I* says."

"Alfred," said Pepper, in her funny, husky voice—on the Boulevard they call it a whisky voice and it in no wise fitted Pepper's blond curls and round face—"Alfred, you are holding out on me. My weather eye sees signs of storm on the good ship Hirtfeltz. I expect poor old Sammy is in there sweating blood for one reason or another. That guy has some awful tough luck and he's such a good little soul. Sam Hirtfeltz is white, all right."

"Certainly is," said Alfred, shaking the contents of a brown bottle with a skill worthy of a better cause, "certainly sure is, Miss O'Malley. I ain't saying you is wrong. Maybe you might be right. Don't take much to make Mr. Hirtfeltz sweat somewhat. But personally I ain't seen a thing. Looks like a nice, quiet, orthodoxical day t'me."

Miss O'Malley squinted down at his woolly head. "Come again, brother," she said. "Roll them dice once more. Mustn't try to kid mama. Lightning has struck twice on this lot recently and if it strikes again I shouldn't be surprised if they'd throw you overboard for a Jonah. I don't need any crystal to see that everybody has been told to man the pumps and let the women and children off first."

Alfred laughed heartily, but his eyes showed a trifle too much white. Alfred had not associated with actors for many years without acquiring considerable decep-

tive powers, but he could not always control his racial proclivities.

"My goodness, gracious me!" said Alfred in a high, surprised voice. "You ain't very cheerful this morning, is you, Miss Pepper? You better allow me to get you another bootlegger. I already done tol' you that man you buys from thinks us movie folks prefers wood alcohol. What you-all see around here has got your expectations so much aroused?"

"First," said Pepper complacently, "I see three reporters from the afternoon papers go into the publicity department, licking their chops, every one of them. Ten minutes later poor old fat Dick Jarvis, who thought he was hired to get stuff into the papers but has since discovered that being press agent for Hirt means mostly trying to keep it out, bounces out all pea-green around the gills and dashes into Sam Hirtfeltz's office. While he's shutting the door, I hear a couple of yells inside. Now, Alfred, when a woman yells like that she has reached the stage of moral decay when she's willing to take out her false teeth in public.

"I have seen Ruby like that before. It comes after the third day of steadfastly pursuing pleasure down the bubbling stream of synthetic gin.

"Next, that big black gal of Ruby's that's such a pal of yours—and the Lord knows I hope your wife's broad-minded about these things, Alfred—well, that black gal comes down from the dressing-rooms and she ambles into Sam's office, too.

"And just about two seconds ago I see Bill Dvorak at Sam's window, and Bill looks like he just has or is just about going to commit a murder. Now you know,

Alfred, when Bill Dvorak gets mad enough to forget somebody told him he looked like the Little Corporal, he has been riled by an expert. Wait for your laugh, boy.

"From these facts, I deduce that something is about to pop and also that the inside of Sam's office at this moment must be something like Verdun on a good day."

Alfred took out a tiny paint brush and began outlining the very small sole of Pepper's shoe. His mouth had fallen open. "My, my!" he said admiringly. "You ought t've been a detective, Miss Pepper."

"I ought to have been something beside an actress, that's in your dream book," Pepper conceded. "But what I want to know is, has Ruby taken the fatal drink? Has she squeezed the grape once too often? Last time I saw her on the screen she looked like a great ad for prohibition. If she gets canned the drys ought to take her on tour as a living example of what modern Scotch will do if you only give it time.

"Well, I may be all wet, but I'll just set here a spell and wait for a couple of laughs. I'd hate to miss anything."

The colorful procession moved by. A line of darky boys, with leopard skins over their naked shoulders and earrings dangling, went by bound for a South African set, grinning sheepishly as they passed Alfred. A group of young actors perched on the railing that ran along the platform in front of the stages, watching the pretty girls as they went by and repeating the latest wise-cracks. A "baby star" in summer ermine flew toward her dressing-room, her pet black chow scampering at her heels. A girl with enormous dimples and a

sullen-eyed man, both in evening dress, stood talking, low-voiced, in a corner.

The sun grew hot and beads of perspiration began to show through the make-up of the actors as they went by, make-up hideously yellow or brightly pink. Hulda, the Swedish hairdresser, followed Inez Laranetta onto the stage, rattling her irons and talking ominously to herself.

It is one of the curious things about girls like Pepper that they can lose their own heartaches in the drama of the whole. Perhaps it is failure that does it. They have escaped the prevalent egomania that ruins much conversation in the land of the cinema.

And though they may, with that sixth sense which develops in girls who live by their wits in Hollywood, always keep a weather eye open for the main chance, the interest of the play itself is really what holds them breathless and intent.

All of which was a good thing on this particular morning, because Pepper's heart was very sore.

She wouldn't have admitted it to anybody in the world. She didn't own to having a heart, much less one that could be made to ache. In fact, her eyes looked out upon life with a smile that was just a trifle brighter than it had ever been before. And nobody cared enough about Pepper to realize that the added brightness came from tears shed in secret and from a new steely case which she had found it necessary to construct about her feelings.

The world might ignore her, but she'd be damned if she'd give them the satisfaction of knowing that it hurt. And if people who had gushed over her three

months before, when she was the great Diane Lamar-tine's most intimate friend, forgot to speak to her in the street nowadays, Pepper could make audible and un-flattering comment upon their personal appearance and probable ancestry without turning a hair.

Those things didn't matter. The thing was that she had really loved Diane.

That, she told herself, was the fatal mistake. It was always a fatal mistake to care about anybody or anything. Because when you did you got hurt.

Hard-boiled as she was, Pepper had been swept off her feet by the warm, vivid personality of the great French actress—had developed a regular schoolgirl crush.

She had been grateful, too. All her old dreams, long since abandoned, had come to life again under the stimulus of Diane's flattering preference for her society. Pepper had existed so long upon the fringe.

Pepper O'Malley's reputation was nothing to brag about. There were people who called her an adventur-ess. Perhaps she was. Women have to be many strange things, not always from choice. Be that as it may, Pepper hadn't started out to be an adventuress, but something quite different. Though in the end, it is true that Pepper preferred to get what she could and to give nothing when possible. She knew the game well enough by now to be largely successful.

More than anything else people had held Pepper's divorce against her.

Bob had divorced her because she slapped his mother. It was not a nice reason. Bob had suspected something of what it would do to Pepper. For his mother, who

had soft, white hair, was known far and wide as a "sweet old lady."

Pepper cringed still whenever she remembered the things that had been said about her during and after the divorce. But she was unrepentant.

"Sweet old lady, hell!" said Pepper just once. She didn't defend herself because she knew it was useless. Proof is never necessary to support an accusation of that kind. "White hair don't make a sweet old lady. I wish some of those birds that think she's so sweet had to live in the same house with her for a while. They'd slap her, too—with a meat-ax."

That had happened five years ago, but it wasn't forgotten. And so, for one reason or another, she had been left out in the cold. And though the cold is thickly populated in Hollywood it grows no warmer for that reason.

Then Diane had come along and changed all that. Diane, of course, cared for nothing in the world but her own amusement. Hollywood bored her almost beyond endurance. She found it provincial and she hated the grind of making pictures. Pepper, with her sharp tongue and her unique viewpoint, was something new. Pepper amused Diane and she said so. They became inseparable. Pepper was a great feeder. She came to know all Lamartine's best stories, and to ask just the right question at just the right time. Very soon Diane allowed it to be known that she wished Pepper to be invited wherever she was invited or she would not go.

"And I was joe enough to fall for it," said Pepper, "I thought they liked me for myself alone. Wait for the laugh on that one."

And then, quite suddenly, Diane tired of her. A few centuries ago she would probably have said, with Alice's friend the Red Queen, "Off with her head." Since she couldn't do that, she simply—to use Pepper's own expression—dumped her cold.

"I've been a sucker twice in my life," said Pepper to the one woman in whom she sometimes confided, "and I hope I'm through. Once it was over a man. That's every woman's birthright. And once over this frog I thought was my friend. Well, most everybody does a dumb dora on that once, too. Now, I'm through. I have ice-water in my veins. Ladies must live, but they don't have to love."

Which was, of course, unfortunate for Sharon Kimm when the time came.

Pepper was thinking of all those things as she sat on the Hirt bootblack stand in the sunshine, when the door of Sam Hirtfeltz's office opened, cautiously, and the now perspiring press-agent came out. He did not look happy. Life was a more complicated business than he had dreamed it could be when he was a hard-working police reporter. He lived now with the sword of possible scandal suspended always just above his head.

Pepper's alert eyes tried to see through the crack his bulk made in the door, but could not.

If they had, she would have seen something like this——

There were two men and two women in that office where so many pictorial deeds had originated.

William Dvorak paced the floor with his powerful stride. Once he stopped to look at the woman crumpled in the chair. His eyes were cold and without mercy.

The woman did not look up. She was sobbing sloppily upon the shoulder of a giant negress who knelt on the floor at her side. Her short hair, dark hair that looked greasy and unkempt, lay lankly about her face—a face sodden, blurred, spongy-white, but still reminiscent of beauty.

Across one cheek was an ugly welt, open at one end and unwashed. And one of her eyes—star-eyes, the critics had called them—was half closed and beginning to turn purple.

“You damned fool,” said William Dvorak, “I told you the last time you did this that if you tried it again I’d throw you out bodily. And I meant it. If you must wallow, can’t you do it in private? Must you drink and brawl in some low café for the whole world to see and make the rest of us foot the bill along with you? Can’t you at least be decent and scientific in your viciousness? You belong in the gutter. How did this happen?”

He flicked the riding-crop dangerously close to the disfigured eye and the open cut.

The woman began to sob noisily. “Let me alone, Bill. I couldn’t help it. Jack got jealous and opened up on me—he was drunk——”

“Drunk too,” said Dvorak. “I’ve told you over and over again that some day that big brute will kill you.”

“Don’t, Bill, don’t. I’m shot. I’m licked——”

She collapsed again upon the black shoulder, whimpering.

“Well, what are we going to do?” Dvorak turned upon the man behind the flat mahogany desk.

Sam Hirtfeltz jumped. “I don’t know, Bill,” he said

nervously. "I'm sure I don't know. You—you're the one to say. She's working in your picture. She's your leading woman."

Dvorak gave him an impatient look. "The Hirt company belongs to you," he said, "at least nominally. Make up your mind for once in your life."

But Sam Hirtfeltz only turned a painful crimson. His brown eyes rested for a second upon the figure in the chair, took in the wrecked evening gown, the bruised face, and then sank to his own trembling hands in a pitiful embarrassment.

"But—but I give you a free hand, Bill," he said, "to do whatever you like. You are the one who's—who's responsible for the policy of the company. You're the one that handles all the people. I—I don't know about these things. I'm just a business man."

"I'm three weeks into the picture," said Dvorak, and his powerful bulk swung once more above the woman in the chair. The riding-crop at his wrist flicked across her feet. "Didn't you promise me you wouldn't take a drink while you were on this picture? Didn't you promise me to stay sober? Didn't you know what it would mean if you blew up on me again?"

The negress adjusted the bent head. "She can't help it, Mr. Dvorak," she said softly. "It ain't her fault. No good you storming and getting sore. She ain't got salvation. She ain't touched the hem of the garment yet. Of her own self she can't do nothing. She's just a poor lost sinner. But I'm going to save her if the Lord'll give me grace."

Dvorak was not listening. He looked at the swelling eye.

"You won't be in shape for a month," he said, biting his words. "Better throw her out and get a new girl and make it over. It'll be cheaper in the end."

The woman in the chair straightened with a scream. Pepper outside heard an echo of it—a brief echo, choked off as though a man's hand had covered the shrieking mouth.

"Don't do that," the woman sobbed. "Sam—don't let him do that. It'd be my finish. He's a devil. You know he's a devil. He devils you, too. I've been here—I—if it gets out—oh, my head is killing me! Sam——"

Sam Hirtfeltz wiped the drops from his brow. At moments like this he wished that he had made his vast fortune in the shoe business from which he had come. Or even that he had stayed in the shoe business and made no fortune.

"Now, Ruby, now," he said, trying to summon that ingratiating smile of his, "you need a rest. That's what you need. A good long rest. And when you're all rested up you can come back and—we'll talk it all over, won't we? Don't worry. You get a good rest."

"Take her down to Esther's office and let her sleep until she's fit to get into a car," said Dvorak to the colored woman. "Clean her up, too. There's a dozen reporters hanging around. Take her through the back lot when she can walk. I'll send Ito to you—you know Ito, my chauffeur?"

The woman went, supported by the still calm and majestic negress. The two men were left in the office.

Dvorak made a visible effort to bring himself back to normal. He did not approve of rage. He did not approve of any emotion that he could not control.

But little Sam Hirtfeltz, most powerful of all producers, bowed his head for a moment and wiped away a tear or two along with the other drops that stood on his forehead.

He had hired Ruby a few years ago in this same office and it came back to him now how pretty and fresh she had been. And Sam Hirtfeltz added another tombstone to the many that already stood within his heart, and upon this new one he wrote the same words that spelled the epitaphs upon the others: "She couldn't stand success."

"Who—who you thinking of getting?" he said at last, when Dvorak had sat for minutes in silence, his chin on his chest, his lower lip thrust out, his hand tracing the pattern of the rug with the end of the riding-crop.

"You willing to take a chance with me?" said Dvorak, looking across with his quick smile.

That smile always dazzled Sam Hirtfeltz. He had an inordinate admiration for Bill Dvorak. And that infrequent smile always made him glow with the knowledge that Bill Dvorak—who could do all the things that he could not—was his friend. It might be his own financial wizardry, his own genius for organization, that had made the Hirt Corporation what it was. But he had always felt, always believed, that the soul of the thing was Bill Dvorak.

"I been taking chances with you a good many years, Bill," he said pleasantly. "I been taking chances with you ever since we borrowed that first money on our nerve and started the Hirt Corporation."

Dvorak rang the bell.

An instant later the slim scenario writer came in quietly.

"What's the name of that girl who was in Nadine Allis's picture? I told you to find out," he said.

The scenario writer looked at him rather a long minute before she answered.

"Her name is Sharon Kimm," she said.

"Find out where she is right this minute," said Dvorak, and he went to the window and stood looking out, visualizing the girl as he had seen her during those few moments on the screen, and trying to recapture just the thing about her that had caught his attention.

Pepper had been right to wait, sitting on the shoe-stand exchanging wise-cracks with the groups that came and went. Because half an hour later William Dvorak came to the door and called to her.

Pepper's heart gave a jump. Something *was* going to happen. She liked that. More, she had had dealings with Bill Dvorak in the past and she liked him.

Pepper knew, for she knew a great deal about men, that Bill Dvorak never did nor said a perfectly sincere, natural thing. He never for one instant forgot himself or how he appeared in a situation or what effect he might be having upon his audience. He had assumed a pose and on that basis he would play the game out. In other words, Pepper said to herself with a grin, that was his story and he intended to stick to it. The William Dvorak whom the world knew was simply a fascinating, forceful creation of the inner man—and the inner man the world had never seen at all.

But, as Pepper knew, he was a straight-shooter according to his lights. His word was to be depended

upon. Whatever he promised, even as part of that pose, would be fulfilled. He knew what he wanted and he was capable of explaining it to others. Ruthless he certainly was, and shrewd, and cool, but he wasn't a double-crosser and he wasn't afraid of anything on earth.

That was why Pepper liked him. She liked his force, his slashing showmanship, his independence. She liked his personality—his poise. She had never met a man who so stimulated her intelligence. William Dvorak was all drama, and Pepper loved drama.

She tripped into Sam Hirtfeltz's office, her eyes snapping with excitement. Nobody knew her Hollywood book better than Pepper O'Malley and it gave her just a little kick to realize that she was in the presence of the powers that be, so far as the picture industry was concerned. But it didn't feaze her. She had been on a party or two with William Dvorak, though she never remembered it by so much as a flicker of the eyelids in his presence, and she knew Sam Hirtfeltz to be as bashful with women as a schoolboy.

"Hello," said Pepper, shutting the door behind her.

Then she waited. The signs of stress in the office and upon Hirtfeltz's face did not escape her.

"Pepper," said William Dvorak, "do you know a girl named Sharon Kimm?"

Pepper thought a moment. She knew everybody. Sharon Kimm—Sharon Kimm——

"Yes," she said.

That was all. Pepper always let the other fellow do the leading. No use expressing an opinion until you found out how the land lay.

"What do you know about her?"

Still Pepper sparred. "Well—she——"

"You can say whatever you like," said Dvorak, amused.

"She's a skinny little thing, but I understand she vamps a wicked vamp. Mickey Reid is madly in love with her, wants to marry her, and Mildred Rideout had her kicked off the Savage lot because Aaron was following her around. She's a friend of Nadine Allis, though, so I guess she must be all right."

"Will you do me a favor?" said Dvorak cordially.

"Don't be silly," said Pepper. "What chance would I have to turn you down if you asked me to blow up the city hall? Wait for the laugh on that one."

Sam Hirtfeltz chuckled. "She had you there, Bill," he said delightedly, "she certainly had you there."

"Sharon Kimm is working over at Kohl's in a picture with Nadine Allis. I understand she's working today. If not, here's her home address. I find she had a year's contract with them, but it must be just about up. I want to see her, here in my office, this afternoon, and I don't want Irv Kohl or Nadine to know about it. I understand they don't think so much of her, but if they thought I was interested they might change their minds. Could you slip over there and get her to come to see me when she's through work without letting any one know you came from me?"

Pepper grinned. She was like a fire horse getting into harness. Intrigue delighted her.

"I am to be trusted to the fullest extent," she said with a pert little bow. "Call me a taxi."

CHAPTER X

A WHISTLE blew shrilly. The kleigs on Nadine Allis's set, banked solid on both sides, flamed an instant in their tropical purple and green, and went out, leaving only a trail of carbon smoke. The baby spots, glaring down like a dozen miniature suns from the tops of the walls of the drawing-room, winked once, and grew dark. The giant sun arc sputtered and hissed a moment in fiery splendor, so brilliant that the eye of man dared not gaze upon it, then followed suit.

The electricians took off their gloves, and waited at their posts, while rehearsals in the dim daylight that came in through the glass roof began again.

The four cameras, shooting into the open face of the drawing-room, their tripod legs sprawled in every direction, ceased grinding, and the head cameraman got out a piece of blue glass and began gazing through it at different corners of the set.

Across the open end of the set was a row of canvas chairs, each with a famous name painted in black across the back. In one of them, a bored leading man twisted his little dark mustache with restless fingers. He had been waiting there all day, in make-up, and hadn't shot a scene yet.

In the dusty corner, a portable organ and a cello and a violin dropped from the heights of Rachmaninof's Prelude to the latest lingering ballad.

Nadine came across wearily to her little portable dressing-room, rummaged in the make-up box among the powders and puffs, the rouge and mirrors, repaired her make-up, let a colored maid run a comb through her hair, and went back to the set.

It was three o'clock and they had been trying since nine to get that one scene, which in the finished picture might occupy three or four minutes.

The silver-haired director, suave and courteous, delicate of voice and gesture, stood beside her and began all over again.

"Now, Nadine," said the director, "now, Nadine. Remember, dear, your baby has been taken away from you—your little baby. You are unhappy—you are very unhappy about it, dear. You feel that your heart is broken. Turn your face a little more this way, so we get away from that angle. That's it. Now—you begin to cry—softly."

But Nadine did not begin to cry softly nor any other way. She only looked more and more bored.

Sharon Kimm, standing amid the coils of giant cables on the sidelines, watched with a sullen frown. The silver-haired director had said exactly those same things a hundred times. He never seemed to lose his temper, nor exhaust his patience, nor acquire any new light upon the situation.

Sharon supposed he was a good director. He had a big name. And no doubt Irv Kohl had his reasons for hiring him for Nadine. But Sharon had a violent impulse to poke him in the ribs and tell him to put a little pep into the proceedings. The company was dying on its feet.

And Sharon began to think about what he was saying. A child—a baby. Your own baby. It had been taken away from you and you didn't know where it was, or whether it was happy or warm. Perhaps it was holding out little fat arms in some lonely place, and saying, "I want my mama. I want my mama."

Sharon Kimm could remember very well what it meant to lie in the dark and reach out for mama—mama who wasn't there and would never answer that muffled baby voice again.

Suppose she had a child of her own now, and it were somewhere suffering as she herself had suffered on those first lonely nights in the haunted cottage. Could she bear it? Could she?

No. And she hardened her heart against Mickey Reid and his pleadings. Marriage—children—what did they mean but misery? How could you work, struggle, fight ahead in this tough game with such things hung around your neck?

The hot slow tears welled up and ran over her make-up.

But Nadine had found no tears.

The director was a dunce, a polished old dunce. Sharon stared at him. Didn't he realize that Nadine's emotions lay deep—terribly deep—beneath that matter-of-fact sweetness?

The whistle blew. The lights flamed on, pouring a flood of smoking molten light upon the woman's figure. The music changed. The cameras' fatalistic grind began again.

Another take.

Sharon turned to stroll out into the air and came

face to face with a girl in a scarlet sport suit, a girl with snapping black eyes and short curls whose blondness was not entirely due to nature. She was even smaller than Sharon, but she held her chin up in an impudent way, and she was smiling. Sharon liked her smile. It was merry and wise and seemed to know a great deal about life.

"Hello!" said the girl. "You're Sharon Kimm, aren't you? I'm Pepper O'Malley. You probably don't remember me, but I met you once with Mickey Reid. How's Mickey?"

"He's fine," said Sharon and her eyes deepened.

Mickey was fine. Lucia had been right. Sharon's heart told her now all that Lucia had once said. But she was still afraid to believe it. There had been little enough precedent in her life for a great love. Little enough to make her believe in its immortality. Romance she knew not at all. But she did know a great deal about love that does not last, love that grows cheap and cold and horrible. She wasn't going to be rushed off her feet in this matter.

They strolled out on the green lawn together, Sharon and the girl.

When Pepper had explained her errand, Sharon could only stand looking at her with startled eyes.

"But what does he want of me?" she asked slowly.

"I don't know, honey," said Pepper.

Later, in the taxi on the way to the Hirt Studio, Pepper studied the girl beside her.

She had been doing some tall thinking. Ruby had been on another drunk and got a bust in the eye from that big bum she was living with. That was to be

expected. Some day he'd kill her. Dvorak was a quarter through a picture. He had sent for Sharon Kimm, secretly.

Pepper added that up and decided that he had kicked Ruby out and intended to take a new girl for the part—a new girl to be built up as he had once built Ruby. That new girl was, obviously, Sharon Kimm.

What did Dvorak see in this girl that might be offered to the jaded appetite of the monster, the box-office? The public was wearied of ingénues, sick to death of obvious vampires, fed up on mere beauty.

Pepper looked at Sharon sidewise. Awful clothes. But behind them, something unusual, something vital. That strange red circle of her mouth. Those odd long eyes. From her, Dvorak might create something sophisticated and different, something bizarre and subtle.

If that happened, Sharon Kimm would be very great and very rich.

And she would need a guide, philosopher, and friend to steer her through the rapids, for there was ignorance and shyness in her face, and a streak of earthy commonness that Pepper understood perfectly; and naturally such a friend must reap of the benefits of success.

Pepper decided that the gods had been kind to her. They had delivered into her hands a golden opportunity, such as she had thought might never come again. It was a gamble, but it looked like a sure thing.

She would string with this new girl. She would become her friend and adviser. She knew the way—oh, she knew it! And she had no scruples. Scruples were a thing of the past, so far as Pepper O'Malley was concerned.

And if Dvorak succeeded in putting over Sharon, Pepper would be sitting pretty. She might even have a chance to pay off old scores. Yes, the gods had been kind.

Sharon Kimm looked at her rather piteously. She was too nervous to smile. "Do I look all right?" she asked.

Pepper patted her hand. "Honey, you just look lovely," she said. "You're exactly as pretty as a picture, that's all. Ruby never saw the day she looked as good as you do, even in her prime. I know Bill's taste in women. And because I like you, and I think you're a nice kid, I'm going to give you some advice. I know Bill Dvorak pretty darn well. Take my tip. Flatter him if you get a chance. Let him see how tickled you are with the chance even to talk to him. But don't grovel. Be yourself. That's my advice—be yourself."

"Thank you," said Sharon. "I'll try."

CHAPTER XI

THE heavy, iron-studded door swung open.

The girl went in slowly and it swung behind her.

Sharon walked across the dark, polished floor, her eyes wide with excitement. Once she tripped over a velvet cushion and saved herself from falling only by a wild grasp at a stately chair that loomed beside it. After that she watched for the great cushions that were scattered all about.

The room was shadowed. Late afternoon sunshine against the stained-glass window at the end made but the softest glow. Within the room, ten candles in a carved candelabra placed upon the table, supplied the only light. The low, richly carved ceiling caught the light and flung it back, into a bowl of orchids.

In a far corner, touched by the filtered sunlight, a tall golden basket, filled with graceful sprays of peach blossom, made a picture in itself.

Sharon felt her heart begin to beat again. She had dreamed of paneled oak walls such as these, though she had never seen any before. And her feet sank gorgeously into the white fur of a bearskin rug.

In an immense chair at the side of the table, his eyes upon her, sat the man she had gazed at once before through the impassable gate. He was smiling, a slightly ironic smile under drawn brows, and his lips were twisted as though he anticipated something amusing.

He was a bigger man than she had thought. His skin was almost as tanned as Mickey's. The way he held himself gave her an impression of hardened muscles, of physical strength. She felt as if he might sit there and rule the world by waves of his hands.

She stood, awestruck, shy. She could not speak and he did not. He only stared at her, coolly, appraisingly, with that slight, ironic smile, until the color swam up her throat and over her face and finally down over her breast to her very toes.

At first she wanted to run.

Then a flare of temper got the better of her. What right had this man to sit and stare at her like that? What right had he to treat her as if she were a slave in the slave market, a horse in the ring?

He was only a man.

And her eyes narrowed and her chin went up, and she gave him stare for stare, sullenly and ferociously.

At that he began to laugh.

There was just one thing that Sharon could not bear. To be laughed at. Into her face now came the look that it had worn when she felt that another man was laughing at her and at her mother. A hot rage bared her little teeth and changed her body into a small tornado.

She went up to William Dvorak, sitting in his great chair, immaculate, powerful, self-possessed, with the riding-crop dangling from his hand which carried a faint suggestion of menace that never was fulfilled.

"What are you laughing at?" said Sharon Kimm fiercely. "I don't see anything funny around here. Not much. You're a horrid, rude man and I hate you. You

sent for me and I came here and you treat me like I was—was dirt or something.”

She burst into a fury of tears.

There was revealed in that moment something that the world now knows well, because it has been exploited for the emotional entertainment of the world.

Sharon Kimm cried rarely but when she did cry she was beautiful.

The tears seemed to flow from her eyes and over her face like crystal water over a cameo. Her face, instead of being distorted, turned to stone. Her eyes narrowed, but the fire burned behind the tears, as blue chemical flames burn under water.

William Dvorak watched her cry for a moment, then, as she turned toward the door, he said, very quietly and kindly, “Come here, child. I didn’t mean to frighten you. I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t frighten me,” said Sharon Kimm. “You—you made me sore. But I shouldn’t—I’m sorry——”

The man swept all that away with a wave of his crop.

“Look at me,” he said.

Sharon turned and stood before him, the tears undried upon her face, her lovely mouth quivering.

She did not see his hand move, but suddenly the room was filled with a blaze of light, a revealing light that beat her down. Sharon’s eyes blinked under it, and the pupils shrank to pin-points, leaving only a field of green ice. Her mouth hardened, too, but her body did not move.

“Do you like that?” said Dvorak in a friendly, conversational tone, pointing with his riding-crop to the painting above his head.

His eyes were upon her face. He awaited its reaction as a doctor awaits the responding heart-beat of a patient.

Sharon Kimm looked. And the man saw that she had instantly forgotten him, and the blazing light, and her own petty hopes and fears and ambitions. Which was exactly as he would have it.

It was a Madonna—a famous Madonna. It had cost William Dvorak a great deal of money and had forced him to use every ounce of influence he had to obtain it. He had taken it from one of the great galleries of Europe and he said sometimes, with a smile, that he didn't understand why that country at least couldn't pay her war debts.

Only a man as rich as Dvorak could have bought such a picture. But it was priceless to him, because it possessed that very quality that seemed to bring a magic self-forgetfulness upon people.

Sharon Kimm did not know that the picture had cost a fortune. She did not know that it had been painted centuries ago by one of the greatest painters who ever lived and that no one had ever excelled it since. She did not know that she was looking upon a masterpiece.

Nor did she guess that the Madonna was one of Dvorak's trick tests that he applied to every one.

She only knew that Mary, the Mother of God, looked down upon her with the glorious Child held against her full breasts. Those were the very eyes of the Annunciation, of Bethlehem, of Calvary. Those were the eyes that had seen the spiritual truth behind the universe and thus had given it a savior.

Sharon Kimm unconsciously held out both arms to that Mother. Then, ashamed, she put her hands to her throat.

"It's too beautiful," she said. "I never felt like that before. It hurts."

Dvorak nodded. She pleased him. She was responsive, in a primitive, reluctant way. Of course she wasn't an actress. Probably knew less than nothing about acting. That was just as well. She'd have less to unlearn. If only the response was there, he could always trick her before the camera for the things he needed.

It was characteristic of him that, for all his avowed atheism, he used that painting of the Madonna over and over to lay bare the hearts of people who stood before him. He was not an easy man to understand, Dvorak, but he did know in the depth of his soul that the man or woman who was left unmoved by the symbol of that greatest story of all ages was hopelessly lacking in some essential quality.

The lights went off.

"Don't do that," said Sharon Kimm. She looked at him, and giggled nervously. "You make me jumpy, switching on and off lights all the time."

She went over and sat down in a low chair, her feet curled under her. She was beginning to feel more at home.

Without warning, he said to her, "Are you a virgin?"

The girl went white. But this time she kept her temper. "What's that to you?" she said.

He shrugged. "Nothing, I assure you. Only I prefer to work with women, not with children. However, we'll let that pass. Would you like to work for me?"

She nodded. She could see that he was amused.

"When is your Kohl contract up?"

"It's up now. I don't suppose Mr. Kohl noticed. They haven't said anything, but I don't think he'd care. Nadine would want me to do—what gave me the best chance, I know."

"You could come then?"

"I have a few more days on this picture."

"That's all right. If you come here, will you behave yourself, and keep your head, and work hard and do exactly as I tell you? Will you let me dictate every move of your life? Not personally. I don't care anything about you personally. You mean nothing to me. Don't get that idea into your silly little head. Whatever I do, I don't make love to the actresses I employ. And I don't care anything about your private morals, so long as they are private and not a public disgrace. But you'd have to put yourself entirely in my hands, if I'm to waste time teaching you anything."

She nodded again. Her throat was dry with excitement. Her eyes were beginning to ache and twitch with strain.

There was a knock at the door. It swung majestically open.

A woman stood there. A tall, bony woman, with a face not unlike the face of a horse, relieved by shrewd, fine eyes.

"Madame," said William Dvorak, "take this girl and dress her as you think she ought to be dressed and then bring her back to me. I make no suggestions, though I can see the picture she should make in my mind. Spare nothing—no one. The studio is yours. This is im-

portant. She is at present the worst-dressed woman I have ever seen in my life. Make her the best."

"The wardrobe's too cold," said Madame in a practical voice that counteracted immediately the stage-set, stage-managed interview through which Sharon had just passed. She felt as if some one had thrown a welcome cup of cold water in her face.

"We'll go into Ruby's dressing-room. There's an electric stove in there. I let it get cold in my rooms because I thought I was finished."

Sharon couldn't imagine any one being cold. She was burning up. But she did not answer. Madame took a bunch of keys from her belt and unlocked the dressing-room door. She went about turning on lights, starting the glow of the stove, pushing things out of the way.

"I'll be back in a minute," she said, and went out.

Sharon sat in the great star's dressing-room alone. It gave her a tremendous thrill. She wished that girl, Pepper O'Malley, were with her. But she decided that she didn't approve of the dressing-room. It seemed to her messy and dark. Sharon liked bright colors. If she ever had a dressing-room like this, she'd do it over in bright green, with Chinese things—she was rather vague about them, but she knew the general effect of what she wanted because she had seen it on the stage in a musical revue Mickey had taken her to see.

Already her sense of what might be suitable to her person was beginning to emerge. Every detail of William Dvorak's room had stamped itself upon her brain.

Just then Madame came back. She had a lot of things over her arm and she flung them on the chaise-longue.

"I guess it's warm enough in here," she said, rubbing her hands together.

They might call her Madame, but to Sharon, then and always, she suggested nothing so much as the over-worked wife of some old farmer. When Madame first went into exclusive shops and fashionable dressmakers' establishments, the girls usually eyed her worn and dilapidated clothes with icy contempt. Before she left, every one from the manager down was obeying her slightest nod.

Now she drew her black knitted jacket closer and shivered a little.

"Take off your clothes," she said.

Sharon slipped off the over-trimmed purple dress and removed her floppy hat.

In her cheap *crêpe de Chine* teddy, she looked younger. Her stockings were rolled below the knees. She wore a cotton undershirt. She was miserably conscious of that. She wished she had known so that she might have put on her only silk one.

"Take those off, too," said Madame with a martyred sigh. "I can't figure why women don't realize how important underclothes are. Those make bunches all over your outsides."

Sharon took them off without a word. She had no self-consciousness about her body.

But she had never been stared at by a woman.

Madame sat in the rocking-chair, her knees hunched up, and looked at her with an impersonal gaze. She didn't seem particularly pleased with what she saw, nor particularly interested in a picture that would have won approval from the most critical of artists.

"Well," she said at last in a surprised voice, "I never saw anybody before that was as skinny as you are that didn't have any bones showing. I've looked and I've looked and I can't see one. Not even in your elbows."

Sharon began to laugh, secretly. That was funny. What was this old woman up to, anyway, counting her bones through a pair of ancient spectacles?

"Take down your hair," said Madame.

Sharon shook out the masses that fell just below her shoulders.

"You got awful thick hair," said Madame. "I guess Ruby won't mind if you use her brush. I don't guarantee it's clean, though Ruby used to be mostly pretty clean. I never minded fixing her up. There's some girls on this lot that haven't washed the back of their necks since I been here, and that's six years. I said to Sandra Harvey, 'Sandra, the camera'll pick up that dirt, if you don't watch out.'"

"But you're clean. Even your hair's clean. If you want me to tell you one thing—always keep it clean, too. Some girls'll wash it when they start a picture and then if it's three days or three weeks or three months, they never touch it again. But you've got to wash it once a week if you want it to look nice. My, it's a shame the color of your hair won't photograph!"

While she was talking, her hands worked ceaselessly, pinning, sewing, cutting, draping. Once she said, through a mouthful of pins, "I got to give you height."

Later, "Don't look at yourself. It'll make you kinda self-conscious. Go on down."

William Dvorak looked up from the script he was studying as the door swung open.

He saw a slender, swaying woman, who paused for just a breath in the arch of the doorway, and then came forward to stand backgrounded by the polished oaken panels.

Her hair, which was the color of an autumn leaf when the brown is turning yellow and the whole is shot through and through with red, was massed and banded about her small head, and held to a distinguished line by a band of silver and green—a band that suggested mermaids and the Lorelei. Her throat and neck and arms were bare, and though they were so slender they were at the same time maddeningly voluptuous, and the column of her throat melted perfectly into the curve of her bosom.

Beneath the heavy, clinging folds of her green-blue gown, that hung with some hint of the medieval over a close-fitted underdress of silver, he saw the flexible, girl-softness of her waist, and the roundness of her knees, and the long, lovely line from hip to ankle.

Bizarre she was, exotic, seductive.

But the amazing thing, the thing that delighted William Dvorak, was that the whole had not been able to overshadow the lure of her face. She carried it. She dominated it. That tense white face, with the round red lips a little open, and the magnetic eyes, gained by the setting Madame had given her. Only it had a pride, an arrogance, that had not been there before, and that, too, pleased William Dvorak, and he made a note of it for future reference.

When Sharon Kimm had taken off the fairy-god-mother gown and put on once more her Cinderella rags, when she and Pepper had gone home together to the

white bungalow court to tell Lucia the astounding news, William Dvorak rang again for Madame.

When she came, he said, "Well?"

"You've given me some tough jobs in my life, Mr. Dvorak," said Madame, and she stopped to blow her nose loudly and thoroughly upon a large cotton handkerchief, "but this is almost the first easy one you ever gave me. That girl was made to wear clothes. Probably she'd never have found it out if it hadn't been for you. Probably she'd have gone on being some attractive in spite of her clothes. But with the right things, she's got most anybody beat I ever saw. She's way over anything you've had since I've been with you.

"I didn't tell her any of that. I haven't got it on my conscience that I ever flattered one of those poor ignorant girls, or helped to turn their heads. There's plenty of others on this lot will do that for her though. So I'd be obliged if you wouldn't repeat to her anything I've said. But I think she's a find. She's got a perfect body. And she's got a face you can't seem to get rid of, once you've seen it. But she's going to be a proud piece when she gets over being scared and strange."

William Dvorak nodded. He was hot with elation, with triumph. He had been right again. He had seen all this while she moved swiftly across the screen in the gingham of a country girl. A glow flooded him.

And yet, when Madame had gone, he sat there in the night quiet of the big studio—there was a tradition that William Dvorak never went home at all when he was making a picture—and he was not altogether happy, in spite of his elation.

Something stirred within him. He felt thirsty. He could give no name to the thing, but it held a peculiar foreshadowing, a peculiar foreboding. Wherever he looked, he seemed to see this girl's strange changing eyes, the heavy white skin.

It was as if some fever germ had crept into his blood, unknown and unsuspected, and was beginning its deadly work.

CHAPTER XII

THEY had been on the picture six weeks before William Dvorak allowed Sharon to see the rushes from "The Bath of Gold."

Every night when they were through work, Dvorak ran the day's stuff for the entire company, the cameraman, the art directors, the technical staff. Sharon Kimm only was excluded.

It drove her mad. Through the long hard days, while she toiled on the set, an instrument for Dvorak's inspiration and the object of the persuasion and the abuse of his tongue, she waited to be asked. Those first days were a nightmare, in which Sharon Kimm, the palms of her hands wet with nervousness, trembled with terror, weighted by the knowledge that her great chance had come at last.

"If I could only see how I look!" she wailed to Mickey, as they sat on the flat little steps of the bungalow court. "If only I knew how my work was registering on the screen! It's terrible. I do things and I think they're all right; but on the screen they may look awful."

Mickey Reid cuddled her comfortably. "Don't worry, precious," he said. "If it didn't look all right on the screen, Dvorak would tell you. You know that."

"He's so wonderful," said Sharon with a sigh. "He's the greatest director in the world. But he can be

awfully mean. He can make you do things you never thought you could do. But he doesn't care what happens to you in the meantime. Go home now, Mickey. I'm so sleepy I can't hold my eyes open."

So day after day for six weeks, when they had finished shooting, Dvorak let her go alone to her dressing-room, her heart torn with fear and curiosity. Followed her with that faint, ironic smile, his head lowered a little on his great shoulders. It was torture. He knew it. But it had its end and William Dvorak cared nothing for pain if it brought results.

Then one night, when until almost midnight he had kept shooting like mad, driving through scene after scene with scarcely a breath between, and Sharon was swaying with sheer bodily fatigue, he said casually, "Like to see the rushes on that stuff you did today in the Roman bath?"

She saw herself on the screen that night for the first time. Former glimpses did not count.

This was a new-born goddess. She saw a Sharon Kimm glorified, thrice-glorified, as it is rarely given a woman to see herself. And ever afterwards it was that picture which came before her mind's eye when she thought of herself.

The camera, which is a fickle, lying, partisan jade, had fallen in love with Sharon.

Behind her, in the darkness of the projection-room, which is the blackest darkness in the world, she heard the voice of Dvorak's head cameraman, who did not know she was there.

"Hot diggety dog!" he said, as the girl on the screen rose from the Roman bath, like Venus fresh from the

hands of the gods, and stood poised against the background of marble tracery and spraying peach blossoms. "How that gal do photograph! I've been in this business since I was born and I've always been looking for one of these-here camera-perfect females. Now I found her. There's not a bad angle to her face anywhere. You can photograph her left side, you can photograph her right side, you can shoot up or you can shoot down, profile, half-face, or from either ear, and she always looks good. We've done 50,000 feet of film already and I haven't seen one ugly shot of that kid yet. And if you'd been shooting around the puffs under Ruby's eyes, and trying to find some way to light her so the lines around them wouldn't show, nor the sag in her neck, and been standing yourself and your camera upside down to see if there wasn't some way to make her look human, you'd know what it means to me to have this new cuckoo."

Sharon's heart swelled. In the darkness she put up one hand and touched her face reverently. Camera-perfect. Camera-perfect. William Dvorak's cameraman, that funny, hard-boiled, low-voiced young man who was so good at his job that he dared to talk back to the big boss, had said that about her. She felt as though she had drunk deep of some enchanting wine.

She heard William Dvorak chuckling that satisfied throaty chuckle of a man who looks upon what he has made and finds it good. And the new wine mounted to her brain, intoxicating her with its sweetness.

That scene had upheld her through many days of blinding hell, when she would gladly have cut William Dvorak's throat, when she hated him with a vitriolic

hatred, when she crept from the set at night beaten and broken by his devastating words. Those were the days when she flung herself at his feet and begged him to take that horrible riding-crop and lash it over her back, if only he would stop talking, talking.

But Sharon Kimm was not a fool. After that night, each day the rushes healed the day's wounds. Even before "The Bath of Gold" was released, she knew she had made a hit. Dvorak himself revealed it, for there were times when his praise was as wild and extravagant as his denunciation. Times when he heaped upon her a sort of glorification which was merely an extension of his self-glorification, but which was pretty heady stuff for a young girl to withstand.

After the "Bath of Gold" had begun its triumphal progress, the atmosphere of the lot told her more. It changed subtly. The others had been waiting to see if the new girl got by. Now they showed her phases of treatment that were not all pleasant but were all flattering. Gush. Disdain. Fear. Jealousy. Consideration.

The wardrobe women and the hairdressers considered always her needs first. A small thing, but it showed the way of the wind.

And about that time the publicity department began to photograph her endlessly. One of the really great thrills of the year had been those first portraits.

Now Sharon Kimm had been photographed before she came to the Hirt lot to be William Dvorak's leading woman at a salary of \$350 a week. But when the proofs of those early pictures came home she usually swore at them and demanded of Lucia if she were really

as ugly as that. She always hated to show them to casting directors, but they were all she could afford.

The "still" photographer, who had his little gallery tucked away in a corner of the laboratory right on the Hirt lot and did most of the portraits of the Hirt stars, was a different proposition. Sharon never ceased to marvel at him. An Indian-faced little man, in a dirty suit, with a small straw-colored mustache, that stood in amazing disorder upon his upper lip, and thin eager hands much stained about the finger-nails.

His life seemed to be absorbed by a constant battle with his wife, whom he feared, over a miscellaneous collection of dogs, which he adored.

On the day that he first photographed Sharon Kimm, one of his favorites had presented him with a litter of eleven and the tragedy had bowed him to the ground.

"My wife'll never let me keep them," he said piteously. "She grows roses. Much more sensible than growing dogs, she says." And he disappeared beneath the black cloth for so long that Sharon decided he must be weeping over the fecundity of his pet.

But when she saw the pictures that came of his day's work, she tasted the cup of supreme delight. She knew at last that she was beautiful.

"I love this one best," said Mickey, when she showed them to him. "It's the way you look when I love you most. Your eyes look just a little sad—as though you wanted to be kissed. Whenever I look at it, I shall want to kiss you."

The photographs began, forthwith, to flood the country. Dick Jarvis knew his business and his business at present, by special order from William Dvorak, was to

concentrate upon making Sharon Kimm's face familiar to the great American public.

There were pictures of Miss Kimm in bathing-suits, in negligée, in dinner gowns, in chinchilla wraps, in automobiles, in tennis and golf togs, on horseback, and in yachting costume. When she had a day off from actual work on the set, she spent it in the little photograph gallery, while Dick Jarvis and the wardrobe mistress carried clothes back and forth for her to wear.

It was an amazing experience for a girl like Sharon Kimm to find her own face staring at her from every conceivable place. Sometimes she could scarcely believe the number of her pictures that were published. They tripled those of any stage star, no matter how popular she might be, and took precedence of society and even royal beauties.

So Sharon's ego, the little imp that lives quietly in the back of every brain, peeping out with its snake eyes for the smallest chance to feed and fatten, fed upon these things and grew and grew.

But she admitted to herself that the biggest thrill came when she first heard some one say, "There goes Sharon Kimm." And she heard it on Hollywood Boulevard, where she had so often walked, unknown and even hungry.

She and Lucia and Mickey were coming out of a little theater on the Boulevard, where they had been to see a picture Lucia had titled, and a group of women whispered it—in shrill sibilants.

"That's Sharon Kimm."

No one has ever been able to explain just what those words do to the most normal people. But no one can

deny that they do something. They have a power to please beyond almost any other words in the language.

Sharon felt that she was somebody. She glanced sidewise at Lucia and Mickey to see if they had heard. Lucia's lip was curled, but Mickey was smiling at her, that crooked, caressing smile she loved. He understood. Her identity had emerged at last from the mass.

And she would make it emerge more—much more—before she was through. She would make the whole Boulevard stop and stare as she passed by—some day.

CHAPTER XIII

IT HADN'T seemed very important—that first visit to Marie's—and yet, when Sharon looked back, she knew that it had been a milestone.

Now Marie's is on the Boulevard.

There are two large windows, framed in iron grilles and hung with gray velvet curtains of extreme thickness. There is but one thing at a time in either of Marie's windows. One hat, upon a small iron pedestal. One frock. One woolly sweater. One exquisite nightgown. Between the windows, the big grilled gates swing open and the long, cool, scented hall glows in the light from stained-glass casements at the back.

No one is ever shown any of Marie's wares in that long hall, where upon a single purple cushion rests a bottle of golden perfume; where across a Chippendale chair lies an ermine cape lined with brocaded roses; where an open jewel-case displays one fashionable set of beads and combs and matching bracelets.

Oh, no, one is never shown Marie's wares there!

The paneled doors of that hall open upon many Parisian salons, walled with mirrors, lighted by inverted lamps. There is a chaise-longue in each room, piled with embroidered pillows. Beside it stands a cigarette stand in the shape of a ballet girl, fantastically garbed in bright enamels. And there are odd pillows on the velvet floor.

Sharon Kimm had never thought of going to Marie's. In the old days, she had lingered outside the windows, her nose pressed against the glass. She had seen famous screen stars alight from their glittering limousines and disappear within its sacred dimness. Once, there had been a hat in that window—a fuchsia hat, with a brim that curled back and a profusion of soft flowers on its crown. Every night, as she walked home from her quest for work, Sharon had stopped to look at that fuchsia hat, until it was taken away. And somehow she felt that it would take a great many hats to make up for that particular fuchsia hat which she had so desired.

And so Marie's had always seemed something grand and inaccessible. It would never have occurred to her that now she might pass within the grilled gates whenever she wished.

It was Pepper O'Malley who suggested it. As a suggester, Pepper had few equals.

"But—I couldn't go there," said Sharon. "Things cost so much."

They were at lunch in her dressing-room. Pepper nearly always came to lunch with her. Fanny made tea over the electric stove and from the cafeteria across the street she brought up loaded trays. Sharon had a healthy young appetite, and quantity was still novel enough to be her chief object. Quality in food had not yet dawned upon her consciousness.

"What if they do?" said Pepper, lighting her inevitable cigarette and flicking the match into the wastebasket with a deft snap. "Listen, beautiful but dumb! Some day you are going to realize *who* you are. Some

day somebody is going to put a couple of charges of dynamite under your pillow and you will wake up and know what this is all about. If you don't look out, I'm going to buy you a case of this new cure for sleeping sickness."

Fanny, large and leisurely, arranging the lunch on a card table, began to laugh.

"You got the right idea, Miss Pepper," she said. "Trouble Miss Kimm is she's too modest. I worked for lots of ladies in Hollywood. Wasn't none of 'em hidin' their light under no bushel. Gotta blow your own horn in this place and blow it loud, you wants anybody t'hear you. Yes, ma'am."

Pepper went over and put her arms around Sharon, looking down into the pretty face with admiring approval mingled with considerable exasperation.

"Look at yourself once in a while, honey," she said. "That's all I ask. Just look at yourself. There isn't anybody in Hollywood who's got your looks. Do I have to keep on telling you that every day in your life? But you have got to have clothes. *Au naturel* you are great. But folks are so narrow-minded nowadays. And when you dress, the sweet and simple is not for you. You got to make 'em say, 'Mama!' Say, you can get away with anything in this town, if you just knew it. Don't it begin to seep through yet that you're William Dvorak's leading woman? Don't you begin to get a glimmer that you're on top of the heap? And you go on letting these fresh little upstarts ritz you. You ought to put them in their place—that's what they need. If I didn't love you so much, beautiful, I'd lose my temper. And if mama ever loses her temper, you'll

think you're reading the history of the Great War. I may be a lot of things they don't teach in Sunday school, but I am not a yes-man."

Sharon put down her ham-and-egg sandwich and sat looking out of the window. Below, the studio hummed, and she loved the hum of it. She loved this dressing-room, that had been Ruby's and was now hers. She loved the bright blue walls, and the Chinese lanterns that swung in the breeze.

Probably a lot of what Pepper said was true.

The girls on the Hirt lot hadn't all been nice to her. Oh, there had been plenty who flocked to pay court! But the ones that counted—like Lorna George and Mary Welch and Edna Sellers—had held aloof, as the children had held aloof down by the railroad tracks. She didn't speak their language. Most of them had a slight English accent. She was an outsider. They lunched together, and went to smart and exclusive social affairs, which they talked over afterwards.

It was all too bad. Sharon Kimm was anxious to be friendly. But they never met her half-way. If they had, the story of Sharon's life might have been written in a very different color.

Sharon, though she did not know it, was going through what nearly every girl of her kind goes through. She was in a formative stage, off screen, where her personality was strangely missing. She fished about for it sometimes, and ended by feeling rather like Alice in Wonderland.

The things that happen to a girl during that period are as important as the things that happen to a child before it is five. Events are written on a blank slate.

The old Sharon was gone—gone forever. The vivid, sullen, utterly natural Sharon Kimm from the east side, whose grammar was none too certain but whose raw little personality was as definite as lightning against a gray sky, had disappeared under contact with a new and overpowering world.

She couldn't be a William Dvorak leading lady, she couldn't wear the clothes, live in the sets, talk with the people of a William Dvorak society drama, without realizing all the gaucheries and deficiencies of her own manners and ideas.

Day by day, in her work, the new individuality was being molded.

But off the screen, she had as yet evolved no positive personality to take the place of the old. She felt strange, and so was almost negative. She lacked confidence in herself, and so did things she knew to be silly and unimpressive. Dawning upon her was a vision of the woman she might some day become. But she hadn't found herself, and so she was restless, uncertain.

She knew that the girls on the lot with whom she would have liked to be friendly had many of the things she needed. She did not know that most of them had mothers very different from Rose Kimm, and homes very different from the shack by the railroad tracks, and educations as unlike the one Sharon had received in the brick schoolhouse beyond the Alison Street bridge as one thing can be unlike another. They were the fortunate girls, the lucky girls, of the picture industry.

Sharon wished greatly that they would take her in, that they would help her to achieve her goal. But they

did not. Her shy, awkward little advances were met with a narrow self-righteousness, a cool snobbishness that first stunned, then enraged her.

She hated them because they made her feel more self-conscious, more awkward than she felt at other times. She envied them in sullen silence. Her only shield against their slightly amused disdain was a vengeful arrogance which was to lay the foundation for much in her future that was not pleasant.

She'd show them. She'd make them come to her some day. And that desire for revenge, planted and nursed in her heart, was to bear bitter fruit of which she herself was to eat in tears.

"Pepper," she said, at last, from the maze of her thoughts, "I guess maybe you're right. I don't know what I'd do without you. You know so much that I don't know. And—sometimes you get lonesome as hell in this game."

Pepper gave a quick snort. "If you get lonesome it's your own fault, my girl," she said. "If I looked like you look, and was where you are, I'd never be lonesome."

"I don't mean men," said Sharon. "I don't want to be mixed up with men. But I'd like to—of course Nadine is sweet, but—I'd like to have lots of friends and——"

"Listen to your mama a minute, honey," said Pepper O'Malley. "In this town you get to be somebody first. There's only two kinds of people in Hollywood. Those that are looking up, and those that are looking down. If you want to be one of the ones that look down, that's your own idea. But it has to be war—open war.

You ought to be grand and haughty. That's your line. And when you go over the top and make a big hit—when your name is printed on the twenty-four sheets in letters bigger than theirs or anybody's—when you are so good this company 'll have to pay you real money every week—they'll come to you. All of them. All you got to do is sit back and wait for your laugh. They'll forget your past and they'll forget what you were, and they'll come to you. I know. But in the meantime—put up a front. I ask you—did you, or did you not get a raise?"

"Y-yes. But only to five hundred."

"Anybody that's getting five hundred real iron photographs of the dear old eagle every week can get credit at Marie's."

So they went to Marie's.

They nearly always went, eventually, where Pepper thought they should go.

Sharon admired Pepper very much. She not only knew everybody now but she had "known them when," as Hollywood puts it. She knew all the latest scandals. She knew all the good deeds done under cover by people who blush for their goodness as they will not blush for their sins. Pepper never made mistakes. Pepper never got fussed. She was proving, in Sharon's estimation, an invaluable guide in these new and uncharted waters.

Sharon had no past experience to suggest to her that Pepper O'Malley might pad her invisible income by commissions from such sources as Marie's. For all her knowledge of the world, Sharon was singularly ignorant of the ways and means of evil.

And above all, she was of the race of chameleons to which most women belong. She took instant color from her surroundings. She adopted the habits and the gods of the people with whom she associated. She had no gods of her own to stand against this invasion. And all her starved longings and all her youth drove her on. Besides, as Pepper remarked, anybody who was getting five hundred dollars a week should buy her clothes at Marie's.

So, when Pepper told her she should go to Marie's, Sharon went. And at Marie's she encountered for the first time the force that was to prove the main-spring of her existence, to prove stronger than love, stronger than friendship, stronger than honesty—almost stronger than honor itself.

Desire. Reckless, enormous, red-hot desire for things, for possessions, for ornaments with which to deck this beauty of hers. Desire for a throne from which she might scorn lesser mortals.

In that little salon of Marie's, so softly lighted, so delicately perfumed, so elegantly appointed, Sharon Kimm—all unknowing—met the three witches who were to brew her fortune in their pot—the witches of desire and of vanity and of debt.

They are not often named, perhaps, but they are very well known in Hollywood.

But Sharon suspected nothing of that when a stately creature in sleek black greeted her at the doorway of Marie's and beckoned with an impressive forefinger.

To the other smiling and black-clad creature who came forward, she only said, "Miss Osborne, this is

Miss Sharon Kimm. We're very glad to have her with us today, and I want you to be sure she finds exactly what she wants."

She certainly said nothing about witches, or anything so ridiculous and outlandish.

In the salon Miss Osborne said, "If you'll take off your dress, it will be easier to try on things." And it seemed to Sharon that she avoided looking at the dress that so obviously had not come from Marie's.

Sharon undressed, while Pepper curled up on a floor cushion, her back against the full-length mirror, her cigarette smoke curling before her.

A tiny Chinese girl in a suit of tight-fitting purple pajamas came in smiling and bowing, and helped Sharon into a beautiful, black kimono.

When she had gone, Sharon giggled nervously. But she was still trembling with outraged pride at the way Miss Osborne had looked at her dress—had turned, as it were, her face away from its bad taste and mediocrity.

"This is a pretty swell place," she said. "I feel like I'd got into the royal palace by mistake."

Pepper waved her cigarette. "This is it," she said. "But don't you get the heebie jeebies. You look like you had bought your didies at Marie's, honey. You got the good old archduchess look about you, all right. Keep the old chin well up and you'll have your name written in electric lights where folks can't even read English."

Half an hour later, her eyes drugged and heavy, her cheeks blazing under the creamy skin, Sharon Kimm held up a protesting hand. Pepper noticed that it

shook a little, that aristocratic hand which no laws of birth could quite explain.

"I don't think I need anything more," said Sharon, with a gasp. "I don't really."

Miss Osborne laughed good-naturedly. "It's more fun not to buy all you need at once, isn't it?"

She picked up some things just as an imperative knock sounded upon the door.

The woman who came in was tall and she had a long smiling face with enormous light-blue eyes that seemed to see things beyond those that other eyes saw. Her tightly corseted figure, with its swelling bust and small waist, looked old-fashioned beside the straight, soft lines of the other woman, but she carried herself with the air of an empress. Her hair was in an elaborate coiffure of endless rolls of puffs and pompadours.

"Hello, Marie," said Pepper impudently. "This is Sharon Kimm. I told you about her the other day."

Marie moved toward Sharon, but she did not seem to lift her feet from the ground. It was as if she stood upon a platform that was rolled forward. She moved about Sharon Kimm without speaking, her eyes fastened upon the slim figure. They flamed to a stare, as though she saw visions.

Then she nodded.

"She is beautiful," she said to Pepper, "but she is much more. She can wear clothes so that every woman in the world will want to see her wear them. They will hate her, because they will try to look like her and never be able to do it; but they will go to see her because they cannot stay away. She has everything—youth, beauty, genius. I know. Have I not known the

greatest of them all—the divine Sarah? This one is like her. The first I have seen in this country. An inner fire burns. You see it come out in the hair and the lips. Of course, because she is on the screen, she may never get that chance to make a great actress. But she could be. Never be afraid, my child. You can conquer the world.”

The giggle died on Sharon’s lips.

She might be only a fat, badly corseted old lady, with the psychic stare that is the trick of every cheap clairvoyant. Pepper, perhaps, might recognize it as all old stuff, part of Marie’s line. Marie was one of the greatest salesmen that ever lived. But the words stopped Sharon’s foolish heart, as words of prophecy have stopped the hearts of men and women since the days of Babylon.

“You said a mouthful,” Pepper nodded her blond head, “and you ought to know, Marie. I hand it to you. You know your onion, old girl.”

But Marie was not listening. “Miss Osborne,” she said harshly, “the apricot gown with the Chinese embroidery from Callot and the suit with the red cape that came yesterday from Poiret, and the orchid crêpe with the Chantilly lace from Tappé.”

Miss Osborne fled.

Sharon laughed shakily. Her face had gone white. “I can’t wear red,” was all that she could say.

“You tell *me* what you can and cannot wear?” said Marie, walking around her angrily. “You tell me? Bah! I will make you superb, exquisite! You have never been dressed in all your life as you should be dressed. I will show you.”

When they had put on the black satin suit, with the lacquer-red cape swinging from the shoulders, and an impertinent black hat, and given her a tall black stick with a red handle, Sharon looked at herself in a mirror, as Narcissus bent to see the youth in the lily pond. She could have kissed the woman she saw there. She could never have done it herself. But she recognized instantly that it was perfect and that Marie was right. She had never before been dressed as she should be. Her education was progressing.

At that moment she fell in love with her own reflection. She was like some enchanted princess, whose real self was imprisoned by that mirror.

"Perfect," said Marie's voice. "It belongs to you. You must have it."

One last note of warning sounded for Sharon Kimm.

"How much is it?" she asked.

"I do not know," said Marie with a shrug.

"It's three hundred and fifty dollars, Miss Kimm," said the other woman.

Sharon gasped.

"Well," said Marie, "that is certainly cheap enough. I had put it away for Mildred Rideout, but she will not look like that in it." Not for nothing did Marie keep pace with the gossip of the Boulevard.

At the name, Mildred Rideout, Sharon gave a half-laugh. All the time the fitters were kneeling beside her, Sharon Kimm was laughing a little and thinking of Mildred Rideout. But when she saw the total on the bill Miss Osborne presented, there was a blank pause—a rather long pause.

Twenty-three hundred dollars for clothes!

Marie's eyes sought the impudent eyes of Pepper O'Malley. And one of Pepper's eyelids lay the briefest instant on her cheek.

"Charge them to Miss Kimm, duncce," said Marie, "at the Hirt Studio. And I will call you, Miss Kimm, when a certain dress I have bought in Paris arrives. All white. It is for you."

Going out, Sharon stopped at the jewel counter and bought a set of crystal beads, a beaded bag and a swagger-stick with a crystal handle for Pepper O'Malley. It topped the orgy of buying with a gesture of generosity that salved her conscience.

When she met Mickey afterwards for dinner she was still flushed and her breath was coming a little quickly.

"What 've you been doing?" he said, his eager eyes on her face. "You look adorable. I love you when you get excited. Your eyes are all black."

"I've been bad," said Sharon solemnly, "very bad and wicked. But I don't care. Only promise not to tell Lucia."

"I promise," said Mickey. "But get rid of Pepper. I shan't take her to dinner, that's all. I want you to myself, for myself."

Sharon hid the bills from Lucia and for the first time lied boldly to her. Nevertheless she got up in the night to look at all the things, hung in her tiny closet, and to feel the fascinating row of shoes to match each frock, standing so trimly on their shoe-trees.

Only a week later she was invited to a tea that Mrs. Hirtfeltz was giving for a well known novelist. It made her feel less guilty to assure herself that she couldn't have gone if she hadn't bought new clothes.

Sharon had never been to a tea.

"What 'll I do?" she said to Pepper and Lucia, as they helped her to dress. Fanny was only a studio maid and did not come home with Sharon.

She was nervous and a little angry. Pepper and Lucia together always made her nervous. There was no question of the hatred, the jealousy between them. From the beginning, they strove one against the other for the balance of influence with Sharon Kimm. Lucia quietly for the most part, but with occasional bursts of righteous temper. And Pepper, like a package of Chinese firecrackers, with her barbed tongue and her ever-dripping flattery.

Now Mrs. Hirtfeltz's tea was of importance in Sharon's life for two reasons. It was her entrance into society and there she met Mrs. William Dvorak for the first time.

Mrs. Hirtfeltz had never seen Sharon Kimm. But of late she had heard a great deal about her. Sam was always talking about Sharon Kimm and what Bill Dvorak was going to make of her. So that eventually her curiosity, little though she had of it, was aroused. So she decided to ask Sharon to the tea, which was a large and more or less politic affair anyway.

Mrs. Hirtfeltz did not like to entertain. She did not like to do anything except take care of her big rambling house and Sam and their three boys. But occasionally she could be awakened to her position as the wife of one of the greatest producers in the business and to her resultant social obligations—occasionally, but not often.

If Sharon Kimm dreaded that tea, so did her hostess.

Lena Hirtfeltz, stout and not too comfortable in her elaborate gray dress, considered it an afternoon entirely wasted.

The rooms filled quickly. They were already full of furniture and the heavy curtains at the windows shut them in and made them seem smaller than they really were. Lena's servants were badly trained and when it came to social crushes, they made things worse by always being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Lena Hirtfeltz was an absent-minded hostess, and on this afternoon she was more so than usual. She had been upset in the very beginning because she had forgotten that Leda O'Neill was living with Mrs. Jack Williams's husband, and she had asked them both and they had met face to face in the doorway. She sighed. Things were always turning out that way for Lena Hirtfeltz. Nothing could familiarize her with the gossip of Hollywood and she asked the people she liked, blissfully unaware, save on such blatant occasions as this, of the shock she administered to the rigid class distinctions of Hollywood.

She had stopped to get her breath and surreptitiously to wipe her damp forehead, when she became aware of a girl standing against one of the purple portières and looking with a haughty but somewhat wistful eye at the roomful of chattering women. A slim, exquisitely fashioned girl, in a dress of orchid crêpe with long wings of Chantilly lace, her hair flaming beneath a wide Leghorn hat.

It was a talent Sharon Kimm had, that talent for making pictures. She hadn't deliberately selected the purple velvet curtains for a background, nor the shaft

of late afternoon light that crept between them, as a backlight. But there she stood, and Lena Hirtfeltz, a placid plump woman who yet loved beauty with her whole heart, stopped to look at her.

There was no indication of the embarrassment that held Sharon captive there. Nothing to show that those moments—those lonely waiting moments while she stood unknown and alone among a crowd of women—were among the most difficult of her life.

Talk flowed about her. Everybody was laughing in an intimate way. The room, which was actually stuffy and overdecorated, seemed very gorgeous to Sharon and aided in overpowering her.

Her ears tingled with scraps of conversation.

"Well, you know how Stanley Craig is. He had some other girl with him, and he didn't speak to Peggy, and Peggy just marched right over to this table and said, 'And don't call me up tomorrow morning and apologize, that's all.' He gets away with murder and——"

"My dear, she looked old. That's all. You can say what you like and I admit she's clever, but she just looked older than God. There's no use trying to tell me she's only thirty-two, because I remember when she was in vaudeville with Joe Barnes, though she comes out now and has the face to deny it, and that was twenty years ago. We were on the same bill, my dear, and she was more than twelve then, I can tell you."

"Well, of course, I adore Nadine. She's just one of the finest women ever made. But I tell you now, I don't believe she's in love with Irv Kohl. Oh, we all talk about what a good husband he is, and all that! But

no woman could be in love with Irv. And personally, I think it's a crime for a girl like Nadine to be tied up that way. She doesn't look happy, either. I noticed a look in her eyes lately——"

"My dear, she and Jack had a terrible row and she ran down and got into a taxi and when he went after her she was yelling and hollering like she was having a fit. You know how Cora is when she gets a few drinks. She just ought never to drink, that's all. Well, anyway, she called him a brute and yelled out about how he beat her. And then she put her face out the taxi window and hollered that he'd hit her once but he didn't dare do it again. She just looked at him and kept yelling, 'Hit me. Go on, hit me again, you big bully.' Well, Jack was mad, naturally, and he finally did give her a good sock on the jaw, and I can't say I blame him. And she just turned her face around again and said, 'You great, big brute, just hit me again. That's all, just hit me again.' And he did, harder than ever. And just then the taxi-driver leaned out and said to her, 'Take your face in, lady. I think he means it.' Well, of course that started those two fools to laughing and off they went together in the taxi, billing and cooing like doves. Which is all very well, but you know as well as I do that it's things like that that get Hollywood a bad name and then the rest of us, that are perfectly decent and respectable, have to suffer for it."

Those things made Sharon want to laugh, too, but she couldn't manage it, and so when Lena Hirtfeltz discovered her and stopped to stare at the picture she made, she only looked very cold and a little disdainful.

It was several seconds before Mrs. Hirtfeltz was

recalled to her duties as a hostess by the crisp voice of her guest of honor, who pulled at her sleeve and said, "Who's that girl?"

"I don't know," said Lena Hirtfeltz helplessly, "but I'll try to find out."

The guest of honor laughed. "I should know who that woman was before I let her into my house," she said cynically. "She looks as dangerous as anything I've ever seen. She's got the bit between her teeth, that girl. Right now, she's torn between a growing belief that the world is her oyster and an intense desire to know how to open it. There's something cinque-cento about her. Not a modern face. She looks like a woman Cesare Borgia might have loved. There's something rather cinque-cento about this whole place, anyway. Did it ever occur to you that this is the only real artists' colony on this continent? Can't expect it to be just like every place else, can you? It's a flamboyant, lustful, dazzling, mad sort of place, but I like the reckless contrasts, and the swift youth. I like them. You people can't be judged just as we judge other people. Oh, you get squiffy when I say that! But it's true."

The guest of honor went over and spoke to Sharon Kimm, and they sat down together in a big window seat, and talked until another woman came up to ask whether Sharon had had tea. Sharon shook her head and the woman said in a clear voice, "That's exactly like Lena. I'll get you some at once."

When she brought it and a plate of heart-shaped sandwiches as well, the guest of honor had left Sharon once more alone, so the woman sat down in the window

seat beside her. Sharon peeped from under her drooping hat at her, and she could not help smiling a little. Such a small, energetic, birdlike woman, with graying hair brushed plainly back from a fine brow! The brow of a thinker, though Sharon did not realize that. Her eyes were deep and sparkling and she had a button of a nose and a determined mouth.

Even Sharon's inexperienced eyes saw will written all over her.

But she wore a brown skirt and a white shirtwaist—an old-fashioned shirtwaist, held tightly in by a narrow belt, and a mannish brown jacket the worse for wear. Only her shoes of brown suède were smart, and on one hand she wore a ring of beautiful design.

Sharon felt instantly that she was a personage. She had such charming manners. Sharon wished she could handle her teacup like that. She wished she could walk across a room with that dignity. She wished her voice had the bell-like quality of this funny little brown woman's. And yet she did not know why she wished these things.

"I don't believe we've been introduced," said the woman in brown with her charming smile. "I don't think I know you, though you look as if I should."

"I——" Sharon hated herself for her stammer. "My name is Sharon Kimm."

The woman gave a quick surprised look. "Is it, indeed?" she said graciously. "Now this is very nice. I'm Mrs. William Dvorak. I think I've heard my husband speak of you."

Which was more, unfortunately, than Sharon could say in return.

Other women came up then and gathered about Sharon. They had seen William Dvorak's last picture, if his wife had not. She admitted as much.

"Pictures bore me," she said apologetically. "Isn't it dreadful? I'm so ashamed, but I can't stand them—I really can't."

That was the only time Sharon saw Mrs. Dvorak during the year. She had known vaguely that Dvorak was married. It hadn't interested her particularly. But after Mrs. Hirtfeltz's tea, she thought often of the strange contrast between the pair and the two violent wills that must have clashed before they compromised.

Pepper—who knew everything—told her that Mrs. Dvorak was a brilliant woman who wrote books on sociology and was president of a league for the education of women voters and head of many organizations for the welfare of womankind in general.

Mrs. Dvorak was, frankly, just a little bored with her famous husband. She had even been known to laugh at him, lightly of course, in public. Perhaps that was why they so seldom went out together any more. If she regarded him as a bit of a mountebank, he may have thought her a rather dry savant. It is possible that the ennui was mutual, though in the beginning she had loved him with something very like idolatry.

At any rate, so far as the motion-picture industry was concerned, Mrs. William Dvorak existed merely as a legendary figure in the distant past.

But between the two, Hollywood knew, there was a perfectly understood and mutually protective alliance, for the sake of their own peace and freedom and of the

future and good name of their children. Nothing had ever shaken it and nothing ever would.

Aside from the memory of Mrs. Dvorak, Sharon carried away from the Hirtfeltz tea the first triumphal knowledge that she could hold her grandduchess pose in the face of a hundred women, and that her arrogance, coupled with her beauty and her new clothes, could reduce them reluctantly to a sort of hysterical admiration.

CHAPTER XIV

THE president of the Hollywood branch of a big Los Angeles bank sat in his office, blinking out at the noonday crowds that drifted up and down the Boulevard. There was a rueful expression in his kindly light-blue eyes.

He was a round, sandy-haired man, with a jovial voice and laugh, unlike in every way the popular conception of bank officials. Perhaps that was the reason he had been made president of the Hollywood branch. It was not always easy to deal—according to banking methods—with the vast personal business of the motion-picture people. Their honesty was not to be questioned, but often their knowledge of money matters was amazingly slight. And yet he liked them and they liked him.

Take Sharon Kimm, for instance. And even as the thought of her crossed his mind, he glanced through the open doorway into the marble vestibule of the bank and saw Lucia Morgan, trim and cool in blue linen, turning from the cashier's window.

He shouted at her—he was an informal man, this particular bank president—and she came across on her flat-heeled, rubber-soled shoes, a smile brightening her face.

"Hello!" said the bank president. "How are you getting along these days, Miss Lucia? Been writing any

more good stories lately? I liked that last one of yours I saw. Can't remember the name of it. Never could remember names of stories. The one about the little shop-girl that married the millionaire."

Lucia laughed. "Oh, I just did the titles on that! I don't have much luck selling originals. Nobody does. It's all books and plays. But I'm getting along awfully well, thank you."

"It's pretty fine for little girls like you to be able to earn some money," he said; and then, "And how's your little friend, Sharon Kimm? I haven't seen her for a long time."

"She's—fine," said Lucia, but the smile fled and left her face rather whitely composed. "She's moved, you know. Rented a house out in Lafayette Square. She's been working pretty hard."

"She's getting to be quite a celebrity these days," said the bank president. "I suppose pretty soon they'll be making a star of her, and then her salary'll jump way up. Is she saving any money—buying any real estate or anything like that? I told her to. I told her about a lot down on Santa Monica Boulevard that was a good buy."

"I—don't think so," said Lucia.

"You still living together?"

"Yes—that is—yes, we still are. But I may—I may decide to move. I can't tell."

"Well, I wish you could teach her not to overdraw her bank account all the time," said the president. "I know she don't mean a thing, but it's a lot of trouble to us."

Lucia stood looking at him, her brain suddenly hot

with thoughts. She longed then, to pour them forth to him, to confide in some one the fears and aches that oppressed her.

Undoubtedly the seed of extravagance had been planted in Sharon Kimm's bosom long before that day when she sat in Ruby's room and awaited the transforming touch of Madame. It might well have been. Long before that, in the ugly barren days, Sharon's heart had been troubled by shadowy desires, desires that kept her sleepless while she tried with her vivid imagination to pierce the veil behind which they hid.

Lucia knew how inarticulate, how shy Sharon could be. After that first meeting with Dvorak, Lucia had held the little, sobbing, hysterical figure in her arms half the night, while Sharon wept with pure panic.

"I can't do it, Lute," she had sobbed in the darkness, "I know I can't. I'm just a bum, that's all. I'll never learn to be a lady."

But all the desires of that fierce, intense little heart had been crystallized by her friendship with Nadine Allis.

Lucia could not blame Nadine. She had been kindness itself to Sharon. But Lucia knew that Nadine's house, Nadine's gowns, Nadine's jewels, all Nadine's wonderful possessions had given shape and color to that passionate desire for fine raiment that was bred in Sharon's bones. Her discovery by Dvorak had placed the means for its gratification within her grasp. And Lucia, reason or no reason, blame or no blame, had hard work not to hate both him and Nadine.

For Lucia had watched, helpless, while the kindling desire grew into a flame that was sweeping all before it.

There was one thing, as Lucia had come to know well, which must always be remembered about Hollywood, because it is the real explanation and the best excuse for the mistakes the world has looked upon.

Reports of the snares and pitfalls, the sorrows and disasters, of Hollywood have been broadcast to the world. And not only have they been grossly exaggerated; they have been broadcast wrongly as well. Oh, the pitfalls and disasters are there, along with the wonders and the glories of it! But it is not so easy to label them. Only the people who know something about the street of the pitfalls, about the conditions of the disasters, can understand and pity the Sharon Kimms.

Mickey Reid, for instance, was one of those who knew and understood. Perhaps that was why, in spite of the anger that sometimes came upon him, he never ceased to love Sharon Kimm. Lucia knew since she had walked every step of the road with Sharon. And her love deepened and held even later, when Sharon had grown almost insufferable with that dread Hollywood plague—egomania.

Because while there have been other places where fortunes poured into frail hands unaccustomed to wealth and unversed in its uses, there has never been any other place quite like Hollywood. For Hollywood showers gold with one hand and snatches it back with the other. There is no other place where fortune and debt lie down together as queer but frequent bedfellows. There is no other place where the disaster of sudden riches is accompanied by flattery and adulation such as the world has not known since a Corsican soldier became Emperor of France.

In the Klondike, at Kimberley, in the California gold rush in '49, a man might find himself a millionaire even while he tightened his belt against the belly-hunger that rode him. But it would take him a long time to learn to spend that gold. A man can buy only so much liquor and so many women. The subtle lures of extravagance, the standards of tinsel grandeur, the methods of spending money, which it has taken the rich centuries to devise, were usually lacking.

Hollywood is different. It is like some fantastic fair, where dicing on one side of the midway provides unexpected wealth, and irresistible opportunities for squandering amid the baubles of the gaudy booths on the other side tempt it back again.

There is no place in the world where it is so easy to learn to spend money—where the spending of money is so necessary to keep up the show, and where spending money is one of the few pastimes for a hard-working people. New York, Long Island itself, can display no more lavish scale of living than Hollywood, and because Hollywood is so small, the contrast and comparison of one's possessions with another's is inevitable.

Splurge. Front. Show. They are monstrous.

And in Hollywood, if you stop for a moment to consider, almost every one is nouveau riche. The picture millionaires—whose yearly earnings equal the revenue from several millions—come, many of them, from cheap music-halls, from cheaper boarding-houses, from one-room shacks on the mid-Western prairies, from department stores and restaurants and factories, or like Sharon Kimm, from some house down by the railroad tracks, via the laundry.

The press-agent may tell a different story. But the proof is there.

It is one of the glories of Hollywood, that very fact. But the *nouveaux riches* have seldom been famous for their wisdom in handling money.

Outside of New York, no place on the American continent sells so much expensive jewelry as the Los Angeles and Hollywood stores where the picture stars shop. No gathering can boast such a display of fur coats as a Hollywood opening night—even in summer. No boulevard in the world glimmers beneath the wheels of such showy limousines.

Because Hollywood gives its treasure into the hands of youth—wild, reckless, untrained youth. Hollywood rewards youth as youth has never been rewarded and, though it has learned, is learning, many lessons from the story of Sharon Kimm, the charm of money and money-spending still burns a bright flame.

Lucia was remembering that Sharon Kimm was not yet twenty. And she was thinking of what those twenty years had been—their poverty, their hardship. Now, by a freak of fate, without preparation and almost without effort, she had been swept into one of the great positions—a position that would subject her to the fire of flattery and adulation and the enticements of sudden wealth.

Lucia, through tears, saw her drawn by chance to the dizzy heights a woman in this age may know, heights envied by millions of other women, and yet to Lucia it seemed she stood defenseless, unprotected, while the pitiless rain of temptations beat upon her.

It was not the immorality of sex that Lucia feared,

nor any sex persecution of men within the industry, nor any sex lure from the great lovers of the screen. Lucia knew her Hollywood, and she knew that those things were by no means the most menacing of its many dangers.

It was self-indulgence, and flattery, and luxury, and popularity, and the lying tongues of sycophants, and the honeyed words of parasites that she feared.

People used to say after the crash came, as they said after each crash that shook Hollywood to its foundations, that money went to Sharon Kimm's head. They referred, those who cared to be unkind, to beggars on horseback.

Probably they were right. There are few girls whose heads would not have been turned by it all.

But to tell the true story of Hollywood and of Sharon Kimm, or of any of her sisters, there should be a thousand words for flattery, a thousand names for the parasites who fawn and court, a thousand synonyms for the egomania they breed in the warm-hearted, hot-headed youngsters who are their victims.

Something of all this Lucia thought as she stood looking into the kindly eyes of the bank president.

But she said nothing of it. After all, you couldn't talk about things like that to any one. So she said good-by, and went out into the Boulevard. She dreaded a little to go home. Because she had definitely decided that the parting of the ways had come for her and Sharon Kimm, and the thought broke her heart and brought such swift tears to her eyes that she could hardly see her way along the sidewalk under the pepper trees toward the street car.

CHAPTER XV

SHARON KIMM awoke as the midday sun, no longer to be denied by drawn shades and pulled curtains, began to beat through the rose trellis outside her window. Where the light crept through cracks and crevices, it made gold patterns upon the white bedspread and the polished floor. Patterns like some ancient Chinese ornament. Sharon reached out lazily and let one of them fall braceletwise across her bare arm.

The big house was very quiet. The air in the room, that had been dark and cool, was filling with a warm golden haze. It softened the much befogged wall paper and the hand-painted green furniture. The scent of roses came in, sweetness beaten from them by the hot sun rays.

Sharon kicked off the covers and turned on her side, knees curled under her chin, face snuggled against the coverlet of her hair. The air caressed her through the chiffon of her nightdress and sent a throb of joy tingling to her finger-tips.

Sharon was beginning to think a great deal about that body of hers and to take infinite time and trouble in the care of it. That was natural. With its beauty she was luring crabbed, fickle fortune to smile upon her—reluctantly but potently. With its loveliness as her only weapon, she was beginning to crash the walls of that forbidden city wherein lay desires she had once

thought unattainable. A weapon worth a king's ransom already, and yet sacred from the touch of men. If Sharon Kimm had sold herself, it was not to any man but to the world, and the world paid her a higher price in gold and in adoration.

She lay there, gazing at the picture she made in the mirror above her dressing-table—a study in cream and gold—and her eyes were drugged with delight in herself.

Sharon had never heard the story of that godlike youth who looked into the fountain and fell in love with the beauty he saw reflected there. But Hollywood was teaching her all too swiftly to worship its national deity—Narcissus. For in the last year, since William Dvorak had waved his magic wand above her head, she had come to understand something of the value of the lines of her body—of the provocative mystery of her face—of the seduction of her strange, unforgettable mouth.

A swift year it had been. A glorious year. A year whose galloping feet had carried her, bound upon its back, in mad flight up the hill of success, and left her dizzy and half swooning from the wildness of the ride.

A hectic, confused, wonderful, terrible year. As she cuddled there in her bed, the memory of that year swept over her in a thrilling flow.

Not an easy year. There had been in it hours of supreme misery. But when she looked back and saw how far she had come upon the road, she could have screamed with ecstasy. Lying softly in her white bed, in the midday sunshine, mirrored in the glass pool above her frilly dressing-table, Sharon Kimm smiled to her-

self, Narcissus-wise. The days of uncertainty and doubt were over. The new personality which she had been seeking had emerged from the cocoon and, warmed in the sun of the world's homage, was fluttering very gaily amid the flowers of life—not as gorgeous as it was to be, but very lovely.

Her salary had grown to meet her ever-growing needs, the ever-growing demands of her position, her way of living. Dvorak had raised her not so long ago to seven-fifty. The Hirt people knew what she was worth—knew that they'd have to pay her to keep her from other companies. When they made a star of her, she'd have real money. Real money. Inez Laranetta was getting twenty-five hundred. Sharon Kimm would be worth that, or more.

So why worry about money? About anything? The path of glory stretched smoothly before her feet.

All except Lucia. How could Lucia be such an old fuss-budget, such a wet blanket? An angry little frown grew between Sharon's brows, and her underlip shot out, half pouting, half sullen.

Downstairs in the kitchen she heard Ella, the new cook, singing. Fanny's voice just outside the door startled her from her drowsy day-dreams.

"Mr. Reid's come," it said noncommittally. "He says you said you'd be ready at one and it's most two. I'm running your bath now."

"Oh, my goodness!" said Sharon Kimm, and the picture in the mirror dissolved as though a wind had suddenly blown its cream and golden petals in every direction.

Young Michael Reid was angry. He could be upon

slight provocation and in this case he felt that the provocation had been anything but slight. Young Michael Reid had, to be frank about it, a temper—one of those headlong tempers that, once unleashed, say much that they do not mean. That temper—understandable as it was—was one of the things that conspired against Sharon Kimm.

But, then, without it Mickey would have been more than human. Which he certainly was not.

This time it was an anger so mixed up with hurt that it was hard to tell where the one left off and the other began. He knew only that he was very, very miserable, and his dark eyes were wistful with pain and blazing with wrath, and there were lines and circles about them that had not been there a year before, when he kissed Sharon among the waves.

Perhaps it was that kiss more than anything else which had written the lines about Mickey's fine eyes, lines that a woman who loved him would have longed to smooth away with her finger-tips.

For with that kiss the gates of paradise had opened to Mickey. And yet some angel with a flaming sword still stood between him and his love. He had found her only to lose her, and won her only to be denied.

That was one reason for the hurt in his eyes and the anger on his lips.

Aside from all that, he was not particularly happy. There was an almost continual droop at one corner of his crooked smile. Stud used that droop as a barometer whereby to gage Mickey's feelings, for Mickey would always smile no matter what he carried in his heart. That was Mickey.

It was not only that he had not seen Sharon for a month—over a month—which was not good for him. She had been on location, and now that he was to see her, she was hours late. Nor that, when he did see her, there seemed always between them some new barrier which he could never quite batter down. But he was discouraged about his own work.

At the very moment when the whole world had gone crazy over bad men with hearts of gold, men with a dash of the devil, men who represented the allure of passion in its more obvious meanings, Allied had seen fit to give him a series of namby-pamby, wishy-washy, goody-goody heroes to play. The most unforgivable prigs, they were—the most horrible bores. And Mickey had as much devil as the next man, and he knew it.

His ambition, though he seldom spoke of it except to Stud, was a strangely pure one. He cared nothing—he had never cared and would never care—for money. He wanted enough, of course. But he was afraid of the havoc money wrought. Yet concerning his work he cherished a real ambition—a high ideal. His father had been an actor. His grandfather had been an actor—an actor who upon the London stage had contested in great rôles with the best of them. His mother had been a concert singer, a sort of Irish nightingale, charming the hearts out of the audience with her voice. And back among the great-greats of his family tree, where it grew in Ireland, was one who painted marvelous pictures which still hang in glory in a Dublin gallery.

They had bequeathed him little that a bank might call collateral. But he was proud of his heritage. They had been artists, every one of them, and they had

thought only of their work and not of the pay that might come from it. They had done great things for the joy of doing them, and never for the meed of praise or gold that might follow. They had a code which had been duly handed on to young Michael Reid the fourth, a code which said a man must always do his best work, that he must never be satisfied with anything he is doing or has done, and that he must not be persuaded by any amount of applause or reward to think of himself as anything but a channel for his work.

Mickey *was* doing his best. And he was an actor, a real actor. But the screen just at that moment didn't want actors. And Mickey, by an evil turn of fortune, was a handy and useful hero to be continually tempted by ladies of easy virtue—cinematically speaking—of whom the Allied Artists had a surplus.

"If they'd only let me be human!" Mickey raved between curses when he and Stud were alone. "If they'd only not insist on making me a prig and a sap! They give me goody-goody parts to play. You know they do. I am always too strong to yield to temptation, no matter how attractively it may be presented. I am always reading out of hymnals to ladies who care nothing about hymns. It's terrible. And you know how parts like that can damn a man. I am always playing the good brother of the heavy, who is a human and fascinating devil. Oh, hell! And I could do Ramon Corral parts, if they'd let me. You know I could."

But they wouldn't let him. Nor would they release him from his contract, which was as iron-clad and binding as any bondman's indenture ever drawn. He must work for Allied, or he could not work at all. And be-

sides, Mickey Reid had regard for his given word. Altogether, it left him about as helpless as a man could be.

And Sharon seemed so near to him; he could always awaken the love-light in her eyes. Yet when he reached out his hand, he seemed to touch something as cold and hard as a diamond.

The door opened and he turned quickly. But it was only Lucia Morgan, in a pretty blue dress, with a little hat of blue straw drawn over her blond hair.

Because his own heart was very tender, Mickey's first glance saw the tear-stains around her eyes and the heaviness of her eyelids.

"I say," he said, "you've been crying! What's up?"

Lucia smiled at him. "Nothing," she said quietly. But she did not deny she had been crying.

Mickey went over and stood beside her in the bay window. He liked Lucia. There was something fine, something steady about her. You always knew where she stood and what she stood for.

"Oh, yes, there is!" he said. "Tell me. Is it about—Sharon?"

Lucia flushed. There was in her nature one supreme quality—one rare quality—that of unshakable loyalty. She had never discussed Sharon with any one, even Mickey. But her heart was heavy, heavier than it had ever been in the old, hungry days, heavier than it had been even yesterday in the bank. And so, because she knew how Mickey loved Sharon, she broke down and began to cry again.

"Oh, Mickey!" she said. "I'm afraid. I'm afraid. She's angry with me because—I won't stay on and live with her in this big house. I told her before she rented

it I couldn't go on living with her if she did. And yet I can't bear to leave her. I can't pay my share of a place like this. The rent's enormous. And she keeps Fanny all the time now, and Fanny has brought her sister to cook. And she has a chauffeur. That's all right. She—she can afford it, if she doesn't want to save anything or get ahead. But—mother doesn't think I should stay. She says we've got to keep our independence in this world, and if I were dependent on Sharon, pretty soon she'd look down on me and then, when she needed me most, I couldn't help her. Mother knows Sharon awfully well. But—I can't bear to leave her.”

She rested her hot forehead on the window, looking out into the street, across the smooth patch of lawn where the acacia tree bloomed, yellow and downy as the breast of an Easter chick.

“We were—so happy in the little bungalow,” said Lucia. “If we could only have stayed that way.”

“Ah, but you couldn't,” said Mickey Reid.

They were silent. Each knew the other's thoughts only too well.

“Damn William Dvorak!” said Mickey Reid suddenly.

“Yes,” said Lucia, turning from the window, and her face had tightened with rage such as Mickey had not dreamed her capable of. “Yes, I say that too. It isn't that he debauches Sharon's body. He doesn't do that. It doesn't interest him. But he debauches her soul and her mind. He's teaching her everything that is wrong about life. He's showing her the very depths of material pleasures and desires. He's changing her nature, her whole outlook. He dominates her. She's dazzled by him, Mickey, utterly dazzled. You know how

fascinating he's always been to women. He's a man of terrific force, Mickey, and he's a bad man. He believes in bad things. He has no principles. He cares only for success and for getting what he wants. He makes every one who is around him think the only things that matter in the world are fame and success and money. He swamps them in the luxury that surrounds him until they can't breathe. He—he entices them to think of physical beauties and physical sensations alone. He's—he's a gross, rank materialist and he laughs at everything that's good and spiritual.

“He stimulates Sharon's mind. But—sometimes, lately, on the screen, Mickey—she seems to me appalling, as though she couldn't be my Sharon at all. She's like some creature from another world. Some belle dame sans merci. And yet when I talk like this I sound, even to myself, as though I were a raving lunatic in a melodrama. I don't know what his idea is about Sharon. It isn't personal. But it's terrible.”

“I'm not so sure you're right when you say—it isn't personal. That her body doesn't interest him,” said Mickey Reid in a choked voice. “I'm not sure. Little things she's said lately make me wonder if—maybe he isn't kidding himself. He thinks he's a god, but I think underneath he's—he's crazy about her. And the time will come, if it goes on, when he'll find it out and then—a man like that doesn't stop at anything to get a woman like Sharon if he wants her. He's clever as hell. Lucia”—the boy's voice broke horribly—“Lucia, don't leave her.”

But Lucia shook her head, her face white. “I have to. I can't go where she's going. And I can't hold her

back. I can't live on her bounty like a Pepper O'Malley. I must be strong and stand on my principles. And then, if she ever needs me, I can help her. We must both do that, Mickey. We're—all she has."

But Mickey, alone in the room after Lucia had gone, felt himself almost mad with revolt. So that when Sharon came down, in a white sport dress beneath a golden sweater, he went to her and took her in his arms and held her hard.

"Sharon," he said, and she could feel him trembling against her, and his arms hurt her slender body, "Sharon—marry me, marry me now. I simply can't stand this! I can't go on loving you like this. I want you. I want you every minute. Nobody else will ever love you as I love you, Sharon. Oh, my love, my love, don't be deceived by the world and the things that are in the world! They don't count and they won't last. Don't send me away. Let's be together forever and ever and take care of each other. I love you so."

Sharon melted against him, and her hands went up and framed his face, and drew it down against her lips, her rich red lips, that were like all the kisses of love-mad women since the world began. He was so splendid and strong. She had never felt like this in all her life before. The palms of her hands ached and she tried to stop the ache by pressing them where the muscles were tense beneath the rough tweed of his coat. Once she tried to open her eyes, because she felt she must see his looking love down into her own, but she could not raise her lids.

When he let her go because he dared hold her no longer, she braced herself against the table and smiled

at him, a half-drowsy smile of infinite sweetness—a smile for which her face seemed to have been waiting ever since he had known her.

The flowering of love could come but beautifully to Sharon Kimm, whose every line had been made to speak of love.

“When will you marry me?” said Mickey Reid. His voice was harsh with strain. His eyes as they looked at her were all passion and yet all tenderness.

She went on smiling. “Oh, Mickey—don’t talk about that! I can’t marry you. I don’t want to marry you. I don’t want to marry anybody. And I won’t.”

“But you love me.”

Again she smiled, that drowsy, yearning, teasing smile. “Yes—I love you.”

“Then I’ll make you marry me,” said young Michael Reid, and he laughed because at last she had said she loved him.

She widened her eyes, until he saw all of the black rim around the shimmering iris. She did it slowly, as if she were just awakening.

“Don’t—my Mickey. Don’t spoil it all. I promised Mr. Dvorak I wouldn’t get married. It would ruin everything for me. Besides, it wouldn’t be fair. I haven’t anything to give to marriage now. You wouldn’t ask me to give up everything, would you, Mickey, just when, for the first time, things are coming to me? You wouldn’t ask me to sacrifice this wonderful thing that’s happened to me, that most girls would give their souls for? Why, Mickey, I’m going to be a great star! You wouldn’t ask me to give it all up, would you?”

"But—Sharon, my little sweetheart, what do all those things matter for a woman? Can't you see that nothing matters but loving each other and belonging to each other? Why, we don't need anything but a little house out in the country somewhere, and some dogs, and plenty of books and money enough for an occasional spree. And—some kiddies. That's real happiness, Sharon, and it's the only real happiness in the world for a woman."

But Sharon shook her head and, though her eyes were still soft with love, they narrowed in a way that Mickey and Lucia had learned to dread.

"No," she said half angrily, "no—not now. I want it. I want everything that life has to offer. I've never had anything. I'm going to drink the cup—right now. I don't want to go and live in the country. I don't want to give up my work and I've seen enough of these marriages where a girl goes on working one place and a man another. I've got too much respect for marriage to do that. And—I wouldn't get married unless I meant to have babies. And I don't want any babies now. They'd take me away from my work and they'd spoil my figure."

"All right," said Mickey Reid, his voice cold with fury. "I've asked you to be my wife. And I'll always love you. But—I can't go on this way."

He stared at her, his mouth working, his young eyes hot with tears, eaten through by that unappeasable hunger that Sharon Kimm created.

Suddenly he saw she was no longer looking at him. She was looking into the big gilt mirror that paneled the wall, looking at herself with the love-light in her

eyes and the love-kiss on her lips, and her body vibrant with the desire for love.

And she knew that she had never been so beautiful.

So that was what William Dvorak meant when he told her she needed to love and to be loved.

Half-hypnotized by that other self, she made a step forward, and gazed deeply upon this white girl, drugged with love and drowsy with desire.

It was then that Mickey Reid saw red. He was a man and this was the only woman he had ever asked to marry him in all his reckless young life. And she had turned with his kiss upon her lips and stood mesmerized by the reflection of her own beauty, forgetting him completely.

He picked up the little Chinese god, the heavy bronze god that lay upon the table, and flung it with all his strength at the Narcissus image that had taken her away from him.

The girl in the mirror shivered and shattered to bits, horribly, as if a bursting shell had wiped her from the face of the earth.

Sharon Kimm screamed. She felt cut and bruised and shocked from head to foot. Turning, she faced Mickey Reid and hardly knew him because of the rage that flamed within him.

"You're hypnotized by yourself," he said. "You're making a god of yourself. You make me sick. God, help me, because I love you, and I'll always love you. But I'm going now and, if I have the strength, I'm never coming back."

The door slammed. Sharon Kimm stood alone and she was just a little frightened.

Mickey had gone. Lucia was going. And she had not even the girl in the mirror to keep her company.

The thin tingle of the telephone aroused her.

It was Nadine Allis.

"Come on over and play some tennis," said Nadine's voice. "I've got a handsome young millionaire chewing up all my best furniture. He came all the way from New York just to meet you—he admits it. So put on your pretties."

CHAPTER XVI

MICKEY REID, with the sharpened senses of a man in love, was right about William Dvorak. Right in his instinctive recognition that Dvorak was as mad over Sharon Kimm as Mickey himself, though in a way as different as night is different from day. And he was also right in suspecting that Dvorak was kidding himself.

The big studio was still and dark. Here and there in the mass of buildings that shouldered each other, lights blazed unexpectedly. On one stage, the kleigs sent a weird purple glow into the night and a sound of jazz music drifted across the silence. But in spite of the one set where cameras ground, the studio lay in that lonely, deserted hollow that always engulfs studios at night.

Yet in William Dvorak's office activity had just reached its height. On the long benches in his waiting-room, half a dozen important directors and scenario writers waited for the briefest conference with the boss. There were a thousand and one things to consult him about—who should play such and such a part, who should write such and such a story, how such and such scenes should be handled.

A pretty girl with the small triangular face and smooth eyelids of an early madonna had fallen asleep, her head thrown back against the wall. A gray-haired

character actor in the costume of a sixteenth-century dandy paced up and down, his lace ruffles trembling with indignation.

In the big chair by the street window Stanley Craig lounged sulkily. He was in dinner clothes. His carved mouth with the deep curly shadows at the corners was angry. His blue eyes were reproachful. Once he looked at the sleeping girl hopefully but her lips had fallen apart and he turned away in disgust.

The massive door into the private office opened and shut continually. Each time it reverberated, the waiting group looked up, then settled back with a sigh. A thin-faced young man behind heavy glasses, sweating profusely, rushed in and out, a great sheaf of papers in his hand. Madame, wrapped in a shawl of ancient lineage, came and went, imperturbable. When she saw Stanley Craig, she gave him an unwilling smile.

Little Agnes, the indispensable secretary, Agnes, the tactful, the efficient, pearl-gray now with fatigue but still smiling, moved endlessly between her own office and the crowded waiting-room and on through the door into the sanctum.

Once as she passed, Stanley Craig caught her hand and held her beside him. "Agnes, for the love of Mike, what does the big cheese want with me? Can't he wait until tomorrow? I had a dinner appointment with—a lady at eight, and it's ten-thirty. Can't you hurry him a little?"

Agnes patted his curly brown head. Her resolute mouth had softened ever so little. "I don't know what he wants. He said he must see you before you went home."

Stanley Craig made a face of utter but much annoyed resignation. "All right," he said, "but it seems to me it's bad enough to work a troupe until eight without keeping them warming the chairs the rest of the night. I've been trying to get—this lady to go to dinner with me for six weeks. Damn."

And then he smiled, that irresistible boyish smile, which shone in the midst of his sulks like sun in a fog bank. It was never absent long—that famous smile.

Agnes moved away. "I know. Poor Stan! But she'll come again sometime. And you know how he is." She vanished through the sacred door.

Stan Craig knew, and he lit another cigarette and decided to wake up the girl and make her talk to him. He'd never seen her before but she was pretty. She might be interesting. All women were interesting—at first. Most of them descended to a horrible sameness after a while.

Behind his big desk, shoulders hunched, head a little forward, sat the man for whom they waited. Everything in the great producing studio which turned out seventy-five pictures a year passed under his hand. He supervised the making of all of them, from the buying of the story to the final title. And he was jealous of power. The riding-crop that lay on the desk beside him was more than an affectation. It was a symbol. He held the whip over the three rings of the Hirt Studio. A man of infinite understanding of human nature, he accomplished a stupendous amount of work. Night after night, when the studio was dark, he worked on in that ornate office, far into the morning hours.

Now he finished dictating a letter which had to do

with a new oil well that had just been brought in on some property near Long Beach he had bought for a summer home. The well was bringing in 5,000 barrels a day. The lucky chance amused him and he smiled at Agnes as he dictated. He was in one of his charming moods, just a little gay, and intense as a dynamo. And Agnes, in spite of burning eyes and an aching back, returned the smile.

He was a slave-driver, William Dvorak. A slave-driver. And yet Agnes and Madame and the thin young man behind the heavy glasses, who handled his publicity campaigns, worked for him with joy and an achievement they could accomplish for no one else.

Something of his brilliance inspired them. The fascination of the man—and he had fascination—lay in his ruthless strength, his unbreakable will, his wit.

And they found, as Sharon Kimm had found, that if he could damn bad work mercilessly, he could praise good work gloriously. If, a consummate actor always, he played to the gallery, he very seldom failed to win its applause.

To Agnes, who knew him flaw by flaw and virtue by virtue, he was a god. He absorbed her life, her thoughts, her ambitions, as he absorbed those of every one around him. He paid high, in money and prestige, but he paid for soul and body and brain given entirely to his service and glorification.

Agnes, who was a clever woman and had long ago become a sort of subconscious second brain for William Dvorak, had evolved the theory that history has strange ways in its repetitions. Only the night before she had been reading some memoirs of the court of the four-

teenth Louis of France, and it had amused her to reflect how in this democratic age and republican land autocracy had contrived to reassert itself.

For it was all here in Hollywood—the régime of ancient kings and conquerors, in miniature it may be, but amazingly accurate. The tremendous power in the hands of one man. The divine right. The pitiless usage of men and women. The courtiers—the suave fawning courtiers—nowadays they called them yes-men. The favorites—male and female. The court jesters.

And the intrigue. The constant, deadly intrigue for place and favor. The politics, carefully played toward an end.

If they hadn't been so busy, Agnes would have told William Dvorak about those memoirs and her thoughts regarding them. He would have been amused.

"Now," he said when he had finished dictating, "tell Martha Burns I've read the book she sent me and she's right about its picture possibilities, but not as a starring vehicle for Mignon Variel. Tell her to buy it and submit it to Jack Martin as a special—all-star cast. Who's waiting?"

Agnes named them. "Could you see Stan first? He's very anxious to get away."

Dvorak glanced at her gravely. "Even you plead for him. It isn't only on the screen that he's irresistible to women. Why?"

Agnes flushed with pleasure. It was the crowning joy of the day if Dvorak had time to talk with her. "Oh—" she hesitated—she was always anxious to say something that would bring that nod of approval—"he's so sweet and so dangerous and so helpless. A

woman feels that he might be carried away by his passion for her and do anything—even beat her. That flatters her terribly. Yet he has a boyish thing you want to mother. And with it all, he's so clean and strong."

Dvorak laughed a little ruefully. "Agnes, you are the one honest woman of my acquaintance."

"It's silly to lie to you," she said; "you always know."

"I'll see Stan first," he said,

When Stanley Craig came in, big and brown and clear-cut after the fashion of young American rather than old Greek gods, Dvorak looked at him calculatingly.

They liked and understood each other. Dvorak was Stanley Craig's idol—his model in all things.

"I want you to do something for me," said William Dvorak.

Young Craig lowered his six-feet-two of health to a chair with an expectant smile. "Lady Luck, stand by me," he said, "I am going to need you now. Where is the body to be buried?"

"You can choose your own grave," said Dvorak, "but I'm going to pick the body. Don't be ungrateful. I understand many young men are clamoring for the privilege I am about to bestow upon you."

"A woman?"

Dvorak nodded.

"Didn't I tell you I was off women for life?"

"I believe you did. Since then you haven't looked at a woman except Margaret Vane and Nadine Allis and Mrs.——"

"Don't shoot," said Stanley, laughing. "Who is the woman and what am I supposed to do about it?"

"How would you like to see what you could do by way of an affair with Sharon?"

"Sharon?"

"I've always discouraged love-affairs in my company. I still do. I don't believe in mixing business with pleasure. It's bad for the morale of the company and there is a decency to be preserved in all things. You know my theory. If you must sin, sin scientifically and out of working hours. But—this is different. I am a believer in the educational advantages of a well-conducted love-affair. Sharon is a rather marvelous person. Don't tell her I said so. She's getting her ego developed rapidly enough as it is."

He stopped, his amused eyes on a heap of silver-and-green cloth that Madame had left on a chair. It reminded him of Sharon. And he gave a short laugh.

Stanley Craig looked at him inquiringly. And by way of explanation—Dvorak loved to tell a story and he had the real gift of story telling—the director said, "I was thinking of the entrance I saw Sharon make on the lot this morning, and contrasting it with what she told me of the first time she came to that gate and tried to get by that gateman."

"She was an awkward kid then. Her shoes were run down at the heels and she wore one of those dresses in which I saw her first—all bunches in the wrong places—and a terrible hat that hid her hair. She stood outside the gate, peering in with a great longing, held back by fear. Nobody paid any attention to her. She didn't know where her next meal was coming from."

"And this morning—a lady in fawn velvet and sables irised in. Gorgeous and polished as some precious stone, from the buckles on her satin shoes to the crown of a rakish little hat, whose brim rolled back to show her burnished hair. Swept through the gate, haughty, exquisite, important.

"Do the pictures amuse you? I like the Arabian Nights' flavor of it. The Cinderella story never grows old. There are ten thousand versions of it and the public never tires of them."

He was silent, thinking of Sharon Kimm. She was a marvelous person. He liked the change in her since she had come to him, the air of hauteur she had assumed. In many ways she was as ruthless as he. She knew what she wanted. And when she narrowed her eyes and closed her lips, it meant she was going to get it no matter what it cost. There was nothing namby-pamby about Sharon—no middle ground, no colorless mediocrity. Whatever she did, she did just a little better, a little more extravagantly and impressively than anybody else.

That brought him back to Stan Craig, and his sulky carved mouth, and his caressing eyes.

"Sharon," said Dvorak musingly, "is one of the few women in this game who make an appeal to the senses of both men and women. She is—on the screen—the greatest courtesan of this age. And courtesans, if they knew their business, have always been powerful and popular. They have changed the boundaries of empires more often than saints and they have also had statues erected to them in the public squares of Rome and Athens and various other places.

"But—with all she's done—I'm not quite satisfied. The real flavor is lacking. I feel an artificiality about it. I want more fire. The Circe touch is missing. The love scenes—they don't get me. I don't think Sharon has ever been in love in her life—which would sound strange to people who only know her screen personality."

"What about Arden Ware? I understand he's been besieging her with the aid of all his millions."

"He has. But have you ever seen him? It's merely flattered her vanity, that's all."

"And Mickey Reid?"

"Purely domestic. He wants to marry her—which would be fatal to her work, as I've told her. Domesticity is the most dangerous foe of women like Sharon. No—I wasn't speaking of a husband. I want her to fall in love so madly that she can't see or breathe or think except in the presence of that man. I want her to come on the set every morning quivering with emotion. I want her to cry over him and maybe break her heart over him—for a week."

"Why don't you do it yourself? She adores you. She thinks you're God. She does everything you tell her to."

Dvorak cut in on him menacingly, a startled look in his eyes. "Don't be an ass, Stan. You've been reading motion-picture fiction. You know I never have affairs with my leading women. It's an irremediable error. There are plenty of women in the world without making your work more complicated. Get that into your head. If I made love to Sharon I'd have about as much authority over her as a mummy. Some men do it, but

I've never been able to see myself directing a woman in the daytime and making love to her at night.

"Remember this. For some reason, Sharon is afraid. She recoils from sex. She isn't cold. She's afraid. I want her to find the abandon that women have only when passion tears away their inbred hypocrisy."

Stanley Craig was remembering the lovely red circle of Sharon's mouth. He hadn't thought that Sharon Kimm appealed to him particularly. And yet he could see every line of that mouth. Sharon's mouth was becoming as famous as her figure.

"Well," he said thoughtfully, "it had never occurred to me. But it's always been an—an abstract delight to hold her in my arms. I think it's a great idea. You're on."

Apparently it did not occur to him that he might fail.

When the boy had gone William Dvorak sat smiling. The game amused him immensely. The screen's greatest lover—and Sharon Kimm. If he could make them fall in love with each other, the scenes in this picture would be superb. Women went mad over Stanley Craig. He would fire her——

Suddenly he pictured them, those two perfect young bodies locked close, their lips crushed. Saw Sharon abandon herself to him. A flood of mad jealousy stifled him. Damn Stanley Craig!

He took three strides to the door, banged it open.

"Where's Stanley Craig?" he said as Agnes's startled face loomed before him.

"Why—he's gone. I'm sorry. I just heard his car. I thought——"

William Dvorak made a violent motion with his hand toward the waiting group. "Send those people away," he said, and went back into his office.

Where the devil had Stanley Craig gone? He couldn't have gone to her at that time of night. He must—he took two quick turns down the room—he must get hold of himself. He mustn't make a fool of himself. What was the matter with him?

A little knock sounded at his door. He swore. He'd told Agnes to send every one away.

"Come in," he shouted, and turned, lowering his head.

Sharon Kimm slipped in, whispering playfully, "I don't want to disturb you. I was just going home. I stayed for some fittings. I thought I'd say good night and tell you the blue gown is all right at last."

Above the soft sables, her face sparkled at him.

They stood staring at each other. The playfulness faded from Sharon's eyes as she noted the new something in the man's face. She drew back, hand over her breast, the faintest of recoils.

Dvorak saw it and it stopped him, cooled him to control this desire to take her in his arms, to hold her and kiss her as he had imagined Stanley Craig kissing her. That recoil told him what he knew, what he knew well. She didn't love him. And his whole nature forbade him to chance a rebuff.

He could wait. He could make her think as he thought. People had called him a hypnotist, whispered that he mesmerized the women who worked for him. Well, if he could do it, he would do it now. He was no wild, senseless youth. He understood this game thoroughly, and he was man of the world, epicure enough,

to wait until she came to him. She was worth it. And he had many weapons. He could spare no expense, stop at nothing.

With an effort that took more than any effort of his had ever taken, he drove back the look in his eyes that had frightened her.

"You look so lovely you startled me," he said with a courtly bow. "I was thinking of you—and you appeared, after the manner of a fairy godmother. Go home, dear. You should be in bed."

Sharon's sweet throaty laugh had something of relief in it, and she said, "All right. You ought to go to bed yourself sometimes. I don't believe you ever sleep."

He came to her side, took her hand, kissed it. No one had ever kissed her hand like that before, as if she were a queen.

He heard her quick steps in the hall. The purr of her car fading into the night. The warm desirableness of her was gone, leaving only a trace of her perfume. His eyes fell on a full-length portrait of her, that had been painted for some exhibitors. The image of her mocked him as a mirage of cool green water mocks a thirsty man.

Little beads of sweat stood on his forehead.

This was the woman he had fashioned to ensnare all men and fascinate all women. And he was caught in his own trap. For he knew, as he looked at that picture, that he wanted Sharon Kimm as he had never wanted anything. There had been many women in William Dvorak's life—women who had loved him with madness, women he had loved much. And yet he now felt that he had never known a woman.

He had made a business of sex. It was the universal subject, the one thing everybody had. All his life he had used it, played upon the passions of the people. All his life he had preached the doctrines of the flesh.

His pictures had been made to appeal violently to the primal instincts of the people—high and low, rich and poor. If he had made vice glitteringly attractive, if he had aroused a perilous curiosity in the minds of the young, if he had stimulated all sorts of desires, he had done it deliberately, according to his peculiar code, and he did not regret it.

Now he was fast in his own toils. The creature he had driven had turned upon him. But he would conquer it. He would win her in time. He knew women. He must send her gifts—she loved beautiful things. He must dazzle her until he was sure—sure—until she came voluntarily.

The orchestra on the set outside his windows beat a cheap distressing rhythm.

“Oh, baby—oh, baby,
Don’t say no—say maybe.”

The saxophone sobbed suggestively above the tom-tom of the banjo. William Dvorak cursed it but his nerves vibrated to the primitive beat of it. It crept into his blood and mounted to his brain, as alcohol might have done. His face glistened. His lips were ashen, and bitter with knowledge that is as wormwood—a knowledge that he had been caught in his own trap.

He was no longer master of himself. He had, to use the studio parlance, “fallen for” Sharon Kimm. And his desire rode him like a spur in his soul.

CHAPTER XVII

TIME moved swiftly to Sharon Kimm. Her life seemed to be a mad rush that never gave her pause to meet herself, that never permitted her a moment to search her heart or to become acquainted with her inner thoughts.

They made her a star in her own right, with her own company and her own director, after she finished her fourth picture with William Dvorak. They gave her a salary of three thousand dollars a week. They had to. Every company in the motion-picture industry would have bid just then for the services of Sharon Kimm.

She went to New York for the first time to see the opening of that initial starring production. And, with some difficulty, she persuaded Lucia to go with her. Lucia's measure of success was filling too—not so full as Sharon's. Brains are never paid so well in the industry as beauty, at least not in women.

"I'll go if I can pay my own expenses," said Lucia doggedly, to Sharon's infinite annoyance. "Everybody does you. I won't."

So, since that was the condition, Sharon accepted it. And she laughed at Lucia, who kept a little book with a small pencil and set down items like a bookkeeper. Sharon would lean over her shoulder in the drawing-room and make fun of her minute, careful figures.

"My funny old Lute," she said later, while the maid

massaged her ankles and her round young limbs to take away the train tiredness, "you'll always be just the same."

Lucia hesitated, her eyes on the painted cliffs and crags of New Mexico which they were passing.

"I suppose I seem queer to you, Sharon," she said. "You've got such a new worldly way of looking at things. But as long as we're friends we'll be equals. I'm no yes-man or court jester. Where I go, I pay my way. I don't want anything from you. I should think you'd see so much of it in others you'd get sick of it. You're not a fool. You must know, for instance, that Pepper O'Malley gets a commission from Marie on all the clothes you buy there."

Sharon made a little sound, half snort, half chuckle. She was lying stretched upon the couch in a Chinese kimono of exotic splendor, a cigarette in her hand.

"The little devil!" she said. "Well, Lute, what's the difference? She does a lot of things for me. I like her. She's amusing. I don't care what she does."

"You used not to have low standards of friendship like that," said Lucia from the depths of her hurt.

But Sharon did not answer. Why must Lucia be disagreeable? She was always cross, preaching. She almost wished she had brought Pepper, who would have told her funny stories and talked about her greatness.

She reached down and took a great luscious peach from the basket on the floor. Beside it stood half a dozen bottles of vintage champagne. A gorgeously bound volume of erotic poetry lay in her lap. Lucia eyed these things with disapproval. She knew they were gifts from William Dvorak.

Because of that, she said, "Did you see Mickey before you left?"

Sharon bit into the peach. "No. He's gone off somewhere on location—to the South Seas or somewhere. He doesn't love me any more. Or, if he does, he has a funny way of showing it. I hate people that scold all the time."

Their days in New York were a hectic rush of buying, of seeing innumerable people, of going to innumerable places. The only thing that stood out was the opening of the picture.

And that opening appalled Lucia Morgan. Like thousands of others she failed to understand the curiosity and adoration that center upon a Sharon Kimm. "A movie star"—what was there about it that brought forth the staring crowds?

For blocks that night the streets were a solid mass of humanity. The faces held her breathless—straining, staring, naked faces, filled with desire—some desire that the sight of such splendid butterflies as Sharon Kimm seemed to satisfy. The long line swayed forward crushingly until she felt the hot breath of it upon her cheeks. Then it was driven back by shouting policemen. The people fought, tore, clawed at each other for a sight of this woman whom they had seen only in the grays of the silver sheet.

It was as if a fairy princess from the pages of a book had come to life before their poor tired eyes.

Sharon wrapped in chinchilla so that only the flaming hair and the heart-shaped face of her were visible, sat in her car, with four policemen on the running-boards. It took the four policemen to get her into the theater, and

in spite of their protection, her hair had come down about her shoulders. The train of her sparkling gown lay in shreds upon the sidewalk.

Around the corner, as they approached their theater, Lucia had noticed the name of a stage star, who had won to a place at the peak of her profession by years of hard work and concentrated devotion and intellectual growth. One who was among the great artists of the earth and who was as much loved as any stage star could be. It was her opening night too. As Sharon and Lucia drove past they could see the limousines and taxis draw up and discharge their elegant occupants. But the sidewalks in either direction were empty. Quite empty.

Perhaps this had added to Lucia's amazement at the crowds swarming like angry bees about the theater where the name of Sharon Kimm flamed in such letters as even Broadway had never seen before.

SHARON KIMM.

Lucia laughed hysterically when she saw that name dominating all others upon the Great White Way.

But Sharon did not laugh. She went white and Lucia saw her naked bosom rise in a quivering ecstasy.

SHARON KIMM. There might be some deeper thrill in store for her than the sight of Broadway bowing before that name. But she could not imagine what it would be.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE crowd in the café doorway parted a little to let Sharon Kimm through. Crowds always parted for Sharon.

As she crossed the empty dance floor to one of the front-row tables, where a little bank of orchids lay in exotic richness, she looked rather more expensive and bizarre than usual. The man who followed her, bulking powerful and distinguished, was conscious of it. Outwardly he was smiling, suave and a little bored, and quite unmindful of the staring throng.

Gusts of talk from the tables, all full, eddied about Sharon. They always did. Sharon Kimm never entered a room except to that breathless hush of curious attention and the following hum of comment. She had heard people say they hated it. But Sharon knew that, for herself, she loved it.

Under the blaze of lights her bare skin was the hue and polish of smoky amber. There was a great deal of it. And the sheer cinnamon lace of her gown was draped over satin so exactly the color of her flesh that it was difficult to tell where the one ended and the other began.

Her hair, wound smooth and tight about her head, shone like mahogany. And there was just a glint of strong little teeth where her sullen upper lip could never quite close.

A great many people did not think Sharon Kimm as beautiful off the screen as she was on. True, the camera toned that exaggerated coloring, that seductiveness of line, into a rarer perfection. But she was a compelling personality that could never be ignored.

And it was several seconds after she slipped off the folds of ermine before even the women noticed the diamond necklace. It is not every woman who can overshadow diamonds.

They lay about her throat like a chain of stars. Probably no one else could have worn them just that way. No one else could wear anything the way Sharon Kimm wore it. Women from Miami to Quebec, from San Diego to Boston, tried. But when the average female fan copied Sharon Kimm's fashions, men spoke to her on the street.

Sharon and only Sharon dared the grotesque earrings—the strange ugly headdresses—the ultra-suggestiveness—the fantastic designs—without becoming ridiculous or cheap. She and only she could melt them into her gorgeous young body. Subdue them to the curve of her mouth, the droop of her eyelids, the heart-shape of her proud face.

At a table across the dance floor, Athalie Wyndham, who had a fortune in jewels, studied the necklace with an expert eye.

"I think it's the one I looked at when I was East in the spring," she said. "The drop is fourteen carats. There are some wonderfully perfect stones in it. I wanted it very much. But I couldn't afford it. Besides, it was ridiculously overpriced. Things always are to movie stars."

"Can *she* afford it?" asked the man beside her.

Athalie Wyndham shrugged. "It was very expensive," she said. "I've never seen her out with Dvorak before. Is there—anything there?"

The man looked across the room and his lip curled cynically. "All I can say is that he's in love with her. Look at the man. He's eaten up with it. But he's got a will like the jaws of a steel-mill. I've always heard she was straight, in spite of the undressed condition in which she goes around on the screen."

Again Athalie Wyndham shrugged. "Reputations are so deceptive in this business, aren't they?" was all she said.

A party of débutantes trembled and whispered together as they watched. Some of their fathers were millionaires and all of their names were in the social register, but they had forgotten their wealth and their social distinction and even their escorts. Would have sunk them all to be Sharon Kimm for one little evening, there in the supper room of the exclusive Mission Hotel. And the escorts did not seem to mind. They were occupied themselves with the problem of the amber skin and the satin that so exactly matched it.

"Oh, doesn't she have the loveliest things!" gasped the prettiest débutante, and hated her own fluffy gown of organdy and lace and the string of small perfect pearls around her throat. "I just adore her. I could look at her forever. Last year in New York they went mad about her, didn't they? Oh, she's so marvelous!"

And the olive-skinned young thing with dark hair rolled softly at the nape of her neck answered, "I was in Paris last year when she was there. You know

Prince Anton Cesare was just crazy about her. They say the King and Queen were scared to death. I saw her with the Prince once, driving in the Bois. And he followed her to Deauville. He's *so* good-looking."

Prince Anton Cesare was good-looking. He was also the most famous heart-breaker in Europe. He set the fashion in clothes and in women for an entire continent, did Anton Cesare. At least three women had made their fortunes because he had danced with them more often than was quite proper, or said they were beautiful, or given them gifts.

And the olive-skinned girl was right. He had lost his head over Sharon Kimm. To the girl it seemed natural enough. Probably the only person in that crowded supper room who realized how amazing it was that Anton Cesare, who was the heir to a kingdom, should bow at Sharon's feet was Lucia Morgan, and it made Lucia both sad and happy.

The prettiest débutante sighed. "Oh, I'd rather be Sharon Kimm than anybody else in the world!" she said with a gasp. "But—I think that man with her is too old. He's very important-looking, isn't he? But he must be almost as old as my father. She ought to be with some wonderful young man like Stanley Craig or"—her eyes searched the crowd and rested upon a slim dark-eyed youth with a mouth drooping in a crooked smile—"like that one over there."

She did not know she was pointing at Michael Reid.

The girl sitting with the dark-eyed youth waved at Sharon Kimm. She was smiling, too, with pleasure at the mere sight of her friend. But the smile went out suddenly.

"Oh, Mickey," she said very low, "Sharon bought the necklace."

Mickey Reid went on eating his ice-cream. "Of course," he said.

Lucia Morgan, who was known in the motion-picture industry as one of the cleverest of title writers, flared. "It wasn't 'of course' at all. She promised me she wouldn't. She promised. Fifty thousand dollars for a string of—*glass*."

"Ah," said Mickey, "but it isn't glass. It's diamonds."

"I know—but what's the difference? Oh, sometimes I think Sharon has the wrongest sense of values in the world! Why will she?"

Mickey tried to take another spoonful of ice-cream, but he had to put it down. He was a little sick. He wished he hadn't come. How could he imagine that Sharon would be here, on this one night, with Dvorak? He had seen little enough of her since the mirror shattered between them.

He answered Lucia. "Because that's what she wants, I suppose. Let's—I say, Lucia, there's the music. Let's dance."

Sharon Kimm did not dance. The music quivered to the very ends of her fingers and once her eyes strayed to where Mickey Reid glided so smoothly across the floor. But William Dvorak was not a dancer. He had a sense of fitness, and besides, he never did a thing he couldn't do better than any one else. Sharon was rather glad. She liked to listen to his talk. There was no other man in the world who made her feel quite so magnificent and important. And he wasn't the man she wanted to dance with, not to that music.

She knew she was looking the way he liked her. She had seen it in the eyes of the crowd as she passed them. He liked her to make them sit up and stare. And she saw it now in his eyes. It gave her a thrill to look into them. Not the kind of thrill that suffocated her when Mickey's arms went around her. Entirely different. A thrill of power. In his cold intelligent gray eyes, there was still that ironic smile, but it was only the thinnest curtain. Behind it, she could see the craving for her of which he had never yet spoken—of which she knew he would not speak until he was sure of her answer.

Her vanity spread its feathers within her breast like a peacock. She could reduce this man, the greatest man in all her world, to a groveling heap at her feet. The homage of Anton Cesare had held no such incense for Sharon Kimm.

Dvorak and she were antagonists always. But it was an antagonism as fascinating as dueling with sharp blades. A duel to the death. Dazzling her with its intensity.

Across the heads of the dancers her look met Mickey Reid's eyes. And for all their smoldering darkness, they cried to her as clearly as if he had spoken—"I love you. I love you."

She closed her heart against him. Ah, she knew well enough what she felt for Mickey.

But she did not entirely understand what she felt for Dvorak. She turned her face back to him, and his eyes held her with some insistent demand. And he began to talk to her, as he always talked, with a fascination she could never escape.

They talked a great deal, often, about sex. Not in a direct or a personal way. William Dvorak was never crudely personal. They talked about men and women—the men women loved desperately, and why. The women who had tormented men, and driven them mad, and how they had done it. The strange antagonisms and complexities of passion. The force of it. The ruin and death that followed in its wake. And yet, when she talked with him, it sometimes seemed to Sharon a ruin well experienced and a death well died.

Dvorak told her stories, intimate, violent stories of things he had seen and known. Tales of weird loves, in every corner of the globe and under every tribal god in existence. Tales of past loves that had rocked empires, of loves that ended in poison cups and subtle tortures in the old palaces of Florence, of loves from which sprang poetry and song such as the world has not heard since.

He knew life. He knew phases of it, currents of it, that she had never dreamed of. She felt herself an ignorant child beside him and yet all the time she knew herself his master. And when he looked at her, her heart began to beat, not for him, but for the things he spoke.

She knew him to be ruthless, cruel, unscrupulous. And yet even this had its appeal for her. Life grew tense, elemental, barbaric, when she was with him, and yet kept its suave, luxurious overtone, as a Wagner brass runs hot and powerful beneath the music of the violins.

It was an infatuation of a kind that happens now and then.

Her hand, gathering in the orchids on the table to crush them against her breast, touched his hand. Her pulses clamored. Fear was in that clamor, dread, recoil, but a great and vain delight because of the trembling dry hotness of his hand against her own. But even in that moment she could not bear to think that he would ever hold her close, as Mickey had held her.

As Lucia Morgan turned in the crowd of dancers, she saw that touch of hands, and the man's lowered head, and Sharon's glowing cheek. And she hated the picture a great deal more than the little débutante had hated it. It worried her. She felt that she could not bear to dance past again and see Sharon and the man who held her listening in that glow of sated vanity, and then remember Sharon Kimm's mother. Because Lucia knew that it matters so much, in moments of danger and decision, what a mother has taught and lived for her daughter.

Sharon had come such a long way, such a dizzy way, treading always upon the very edge of the cliff. Lucia's hand tightened on Mickey's as she tried coldly to realize that her little Sharon Kimm had become an idol to whom even the great ones of the earth were glad to bow. If only she could bring Sharon and Mickey together once more, could help to dissolve this anger and pride that held them apart!

The music stopped. When the dancers were back at their own table, Lucia said suddenly, "I don't see why Sharon goes out in public with Mr. Dvorak. He's got a wife."

"Yes," said Mickey Reid.

"Well, then, why does she?"

"Oh—William Dvorak is an important man. I suppose Sharon is grateful to him. He made her. You know, Lute, she never does anything without asking his advice, even though he doesn't direct her any more. I understand he chooses her directors and her stories and everything. He likes to be seen with her every now and then, I suppose, just to remind people that he—created her. He's very rich. People will probably say that he gave her the diamond necklace."

"Oh, Mickey," Lucia turned white, "that's wicked! Sharon has been so decent. You know that. She's—she's straight that way, in spite of all the men who've been crazy about her. When they make fools of themselves over her it just—just makes her vain, that's all. I know she bought that necklace herself. Joan Stillman knows it, too."

Mickey did not answer. He was drawing on the tablecloth with his spoon.

"Anyway," said Lucia wistfully, "Sharon hasn't forgotten all her old friends. If it wasn't William Dvorak I know she'd rather be with us."

"I—Lucia,"—Mickey straightened up suddenly—"let's go. Do you mind? I can't—it's—do you mind?"

The lids fluttered over Lucia's eyes for a moment. Then with a little smile she gathered up her cloak. And they went out, both holding their heads rather high as they passed the table where Sharon Kimm sat, the diamond necklace framing her face in a pale fire.

Outside the big hotel, shooting its glittering tiers up into the black night, cars were parked in close and formal rows. A democratic gathering. Polished ele-

gance side by side with dilapidated and disreputable lizzies. In one corner near the walled driveway the bright-colored cabs made a splotch of color.

But the taxi-drivers had deserted their stands. They were gathered, with half a dozen private chauffeurs and a dozen curious loungers, about the car that stood in a sort of splendid isolation just inside the green wire gates.

A tall youth, in dark uniform, squinted his eyes critically at it and remarked, "Some wagon!"

It prompted speech among the awed gathering.

"That ain't real gold, is it?" demanded a squat charioteer. "You don't suppose that's real gold?"

Serious as a preacher, a colored driver examined the automobile and then delivered himself, "That's the swellest job I ever saw in my life."

The little chap with red hair stuck his head through the open window.

"Cricket!" he said. "That's not an automobile. That's a lady's boudoir."

The car shone like a pool of light disdainful of their praises.

It was a Rolls-Royce. But it was more than that. It was a Rolls-Royce specially designed and built. Hardly of the same world as the little car with the purple lining that had once belonged to a girl named Sharon Kimm.

The body of the car was enameled a deep shining white that made it look carved from alabaster. The wheels and the fenders were a wicked black, that vied with the patent-leather tire covers and top of the cabriolet.

Inside, it was upholstered in orchid silk, the foot-cushions were of orchid silk, and the robe was of the same lined with white fur. Even the floor was covered with orchid velvet over which was flung a tiny white fur rug.

The gold door handles, and the gold cigarette paraphernalia and the gold-mounted crystal lamps and vases shone like the adornments of Cleopatra's galley.

At one side there was a case of orchid leather, mounted in gold, and filled with feminine appointments in orchid enamel—mirrors and powder-puffs and lip-sticks and other such vanities.

On the outer door was a gold plate with a small monogram outlined in diamonds.

The red-headed taxi-driver read it.

"Who in hell is S. K.?" he demanded of the world at large. "Must be some movie queen."

The liveried chauffeur on the front seat, watching with disdainful but hawk-like eyes, answered grandly, "This is Miss Sharon Kimm's car."

"Oh, lulu!" said the freckled one. "Some baby! And some car! How much did it set her back?"

The chauffeur looked down upon him. "I'm sure I couldn't say," he said. "Miss Kimm ordered it in England. It's just been delivered."

"Not less than twenty thousand—maybe more," said the colored driver positively.

CHAPTER XIX

WITH a gold pencil, a diamond set where the eraser should have been, Sharon checked over the list on her knees.

At the Louis-Sixteenth desk in the corner, her secretary—a tall, rather handsome girl in blue serge—checked a similar one. Somehow her resolute shoulders and fine head didn't belong with that distinctly immoral-looking old desk. For it was a desk that suggested a pretty and naughty French marquise, writing love notes and twinkling behind her patches and powder as she did it. Sharon had bought it in Venice.

Lucia Morgan, curled up on the chaise-longue by the windows, read the morning paper, giving it now and then little angry jerks. This room had always affected her that way, ever since Sharon bought Paradise, one of the most beautiful of the Beverly Hills estates.

And yet it was a wonderful room, running over with sheer woman-daintiness. It was so big that you could easily have put the whole of the little house down by the railroad tracks within its four shining walls.

It was manifestly Sharon Kimm's—that room. Lucia felt that she would have known to whom it belonged if she had stumbled upon it in the pyramids.

Orchid tones prevailed everywhere, the orchid that is the melting union of the softest sea-shell pink and the tenderest forget-me-not. But there were splashes

of vivid peacock blues and jade greens and gold everywhere. The carpet showed peacock blue where it wasn't hidden beneath white bear rugs. And there was a little table by the bed with black legs and a hand-carved jade top.

The whole room centered around the bed—a great golden bed, spilling pillows of priceless lace with a lace spread over which was flung a rug of orchid marabou, tied with golden ribbons, bow after bow with long delicate streamers. Above it was a canopy of gold-and-white brocade, with draperies at either side, and the ceiling lined with mirrors which seemed backed with gold, because of the glow reflected in them.

On the mantel, beneath which burned a wood fire, stood an old Chinese wine jar in those inimitable shades of blue and gold and rose and brown. A masterpiece of fifteenth-century art.

Of course there was a glass perfume table, with its perfume lamp and dozens of bottles in every shape, size, and color. And upon the long dressing-table gold-backed brushes and trays heaped with treasures and open jewel-boxes caught the sunlight.

At night, when the jade and amethyst and orange lamps were alight, it was Babylonian, that room.

But in the daytime when Mina and Josephine, the two personal maids of its mistress, came in and flung open the windows, it was almost an inspired room.

There were eight French windows—one whole side of the room. They were curtained in purple taffeta, overhung with three layers of orchid chiffon, edged with gold lace and tied back with bands of heavy gold embroidery. But when the blinds were up the light came

in, palely gray through the ocean fog or sparkling when the sun shone.

And those windows looked out over the terraces and the trees of Paradise. Beyond the pink plaster walls, which shut Paradise in, lay the swelling hills, and an orange orchard, darkly green and fragrant, and endless, shade-bordered boulevards. The windows gave straight upon the wide garden walk, on either side of which grew rows of the flaming eucalyptus, all on fire with blossoms.

Sharon Kimm had bought Paradise when she returned the last time from Europe. Paradise with its acres of well-kept gardens, its winding walks, its terraces, its swimming-pool, its tennis courts, and its big walled stables. Above all the pink château, like the dream-palace of an Italian princess, crowning its highest knoll.

The house was enormous. The ground floor spread from the main building, where the hundred-foot living-room and the paneled dining-room and the hall were located, into rambling wings. In one lower wing were the library, the music-room, a little downstairs boudoir, a sun-porch filled with plants and wicker furniture, and a long flagged corridor, that opened between the rooms out on a patio. In the other wing was the breakfast-room, and behind that the kitchen and servants' quarters. On the second floor, Sharon's suite—bed-room, bath, dressing-room, closets and sitting-room—two complete guest suites and the secretary's rooms. And on the third floor more guest rooms and a billiard-room, which was also Sharon's projection-room, with a projection machine and a screen. The chauffeurs and

outside men had quarters over the garage and the stables. Altogether there were twenty-four rooms. A mansion which an English lord or a New York millionaire might have been proud to own.

For a long time Paradise was the show-place of all the show-places belonging to the movie celebrities. The rubber-neck wagon used to stop outside its vine-covered walls and while the man with the megaphone dwelt upon the quarter of a million dollars it had cost, tourists, who had long dreamed of seeing Hollywood and its picture stars, peered through the lacy peppers, trying to catch a glimpse of the lady of the mansion.

The rubber-neck wagons do not stop at Paradise any more, unless some old-timer behind the megaphone happens to remember that Sharon Kimm once lived there and repeats some of its ancient glories.

Lucia Morgan loved Paradise because it was beautiful, and as Sharon and Joan Stillman, the tall secretary, went over the names on their lists, she looked out upon it with fond eyes. And yet it made her a little sad. There never seemed to be any happiness in Paradise. Certainly never any peace. And to Lucia there could be no happiness without peace.

It was, in its magnificent way, something of a mad-house.

Behind her she heard Sharon's voice, "And Eloise Mulky and her husband—what's his name, Lute?"

"I think it's Robert Eversly," said Lucia from behind the paper.

"Oh, yes—Mr. and Mrs. Robert Eversly, Joan. Now, have we forgotten anybody?" Her brows drew together. "No-o—oh, yes, that artist, Raoul D'Arcy,

and the cunning little girl he goes with, Pearl Ward. And have we got Al and Maggie Qunanne?"

Lucia laid down her paper. "Are you having all Hollywood at this darn party, Sharon?" she asked.

Sharon glanced at her in surprise. Then her eyes narrowed. "I guess so. It's *my* birthday, isn't it? Besides—I adore parties. I haven't given a really big one for—weeks."

"It'll cost a good deal," said Lucia.

"I shouldn't be surprised," said Sharon indifferently.

Then the flame of excitement, love of excitement, raced across her face. "Oh, I've a great idea! Nobody's ever had a real masquerade in Hollywood. I mean a grand one. We ought to be able to give the finest costume ball in the world, much nicer than the one we went to at Lady—what was her name, Joan, at that old castle near Stratford? Change the invitations right away, Joan."

The secretary looked doubtful. "They're all engraved."

Again the green eyes narrowed. "They can be engraved again, can't they?" she demanded.

"Oh, yes, I suppose so. But they were very expensive——"

Sharon Kimm looked at the tall secretary in fury. One hand shot out and grabbed a lacy pillow and with deliberate violence she fired it. "Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!" she cried. "What do I care how expensive it is? I want it. And I'm going to have it."

The tall secretary stood unmoved. The pillow had gone wild. Evidently there was nothing new in all this. "I know, Miss Kimm, but you've already ordered that

Lucile model from Marie's for the party and—I'm afraid—right now, she won't take it back."

"Why should she? I can wear it some other time, can't I?"

Lucia laughed. With a quick movement she swung open an ivory-paneled door and disclosed the big wardrobe presses, hung full of laces and silks, and every known variety of gown—row after row of them.

"You really haven't enough dresses," said Lucia sarcastically. "Really, you haven't. I counted seventy-eight dresses in there this morning—just dresses. To say nothing of those drawers and drawers of sweaters and hats and shoes and underwear. You hardly have enough to keep you covered, have you?"

"Miss Morgan's right," persuaded Joan Stillman. "You really don't need a new frock, and this was a very——"

"Joan," said Sharon Kimm—her lips drew back against her teeth and there was a warning light in her eyes—"if you use the word 'expensive' just once more, I'll have you sent to the dungeon and strung up by your toes."

"I know you think you could do it, too, Miss Kimm," Joan Stillman said steadily, but her hands crumpled and squeezed the paper she held. "You think sometimes you're a queen, ruling over this domain, and that you can always do just as you want. People have made you think that way. And you think you can spend all the money you want whether you've got it or not."

"But I can't stand here any longer and let you go on without saying a word. You're spending too much money, Miss Kimm. You don't realize. But you'll get

yourself into a corner. And people get awfully hard when it's about money. I know that. You can't keep this pace. You're deeply in debt. You're always in debt. You have been ever since I came to work for you. I've never seen anybody so extravagant as you are, and I've worked for some very rich women. You don't seem to understand about money. I got an—insulting letter from Marie this morning. She's been very patient; I must admit that. She doesn't want to sue, because you've been one of her best customers. But she says you owe her so much she'll have to. And the decorators who did this house over are getting nasty, and you have paid but one quarter of your income tax, and I told you the house didn't need doing over. But you——”

“Joan, I couldn't stand those yellow walls in the drawing-room,” said Sharon Kimm plaintively.

“But—you can't always have everything just the way you want it,” said Joan Stillman, “and now you're going to spend a lot more money—thousands of dollars—for a party, and it will get in the papers and make all the people you owe money so sore.”

Sharon Kimm sat up straight in bed, the short thick mass of her hair falling over her shoulders. Through the black georgette of her nightgown her body seemed a thing of marble rather than of flesh. Her face wore an expression of wistful annoyance. And she began to beat on the bedclothes with her doubled fists.

“Oh, darn 'em!” she said. “They make me sick. It's too silly. Why, they won't dare to sue me. I'm Sharon Kimm.”

It was superb in its arrogant simplicity.

Joan Stillman hesitated before it, then, "I'm afraid they will."

"Of course they won't dare," said Sharon Kimm icily. "I'll pay them all, the idiots. Why, they know the salary I'm getting. They know who I am. They've never sued me. It's all too ridiculous. You do make such a fuss, Joan. How can I be in debt so much?"

"If you'd let me sit down and go over your income and what you're spending—" began the secretary.

Sharon hid her ears with her hands. "Stop it. It makes my head ache. There's plenty of money. People want to sell me things. It means a lot to them to have my patronage. I can't be worried and harassed and annoyed like this all the time about bills—bills—bills. And never be allowed to do anything without——"

"If you ask me," said Lucia suddenly, "you're pretty lucky. You've never really bothered about any of it, Sharon. You're one of those people who seem to be able to go on forever, spending too much, owing everybody, and having people wonder how they get away with it. What do you know about bills or collectors? Joan takes all that off your shoulders, just as I used to. You were always like that. I remember how it was from the beginning, as soon as there was any money at all. When Kohl gave you a contract for seventy-five dollars a week, you spent twelve months' salary in about eight days and were in trouble all year."

"Well it came out all right, didn't it?" asked impudent Sharon.

"Yes, because you got a raise and then you went over to Hirt for more money. But those things catch up with people after a while, my dear. There is

always a crash sometime. I've watched. Sooner or later it comes. You've been going along building on sand. You've been getting away with it. But you can't go on getting away with it forever. You've hit the top of your earning power now. It won't be long before you're bound to start down-hill. Your popularity depends on things that by their very nature can't last. I'm sorry. But if you get into a corner *now* you'll have to find some other way out."

"Damn," said Sharon Kimm. "What an infernal nuisance! Why do lots of the other girls have plenty—and buy subdivisions and oil stock then?"

"Because they don't buy all the reckless things they desire," said Lucia quietly. "They deny themselves. They're good stewards of the fortunes that have fallen into their hands. You're not a good steward, Sharon, you nor any of your kind. And—to him that hath shall be given—that's what it means."

"Oh, you and your darn Bible quotations!" said Sharon Kimm.

But she sat silent a long time.

Behind the inscrutable green of her eyes marched a little company of strangely assorted thoughts. Annoyance. Indignation. Actually a feeling that she was being badly used. Self-pity.

What was it all about anyway? Why make such a fuss about such simple things? To Sharon Kimm, the whole thing was a matter of slips of paper. She never saw any money. She had less actual cash than girls who earned one hundredth part of her salary. She never saw her weekly checks for three thousand dollars. They were sent to Joan, and Joan turned them over to

that friendly old man who was president of the bank and had helped her out a couple of times with loans. And then Joan wrote on slips of paper, and paid for things.

For weeks at a time Sharon never had five dollars in money. When she bought, she simply selected, and walked out. Bills came later—more slips of paper—and Joan took care of them. Sharon never moved alone. There was always a chauffeur, or a footman, or her maid, or Joan to attend to things.

Money to her had meant originally the few-and-far-between silver coins that came her way in the old days down by the tracks, or later at the laundry when she got thirteen dollars a week.

But this was a different proposition. She couldn't make it a reality. It had always been all right. It always would be. The president of the bank was a good friend of hers. He liked her. He'd take care of it.

Slips of paper.

The thought downed a nasty little fear that she had become familiar with of late. A sneaking little fear that made a cold spot in her heart whenever she thought about money and debts.

She drove it away with the thing that was still dominant. Desire. Desire for beauty. Desire for things. Desire to gratify her own wishes. Desire for luxury and service and flattery, that was to be bought. Desire for the humiliation of her enemies, out of the past. Reckless, undisciplined desire.

Unsated vanity swelled up within her, strong as Fate.

Since those early days, when it had first begun to hunger in the back of her brain, how it had grown!

Never denied, never fought back, it had become terrible in strength and influence.

Ah, it was to that desire most of all that she was debtor! Debtor first. Slave at last.

She loved Lucia. She admired Joan Stillman. But she did not believe them. She chose to believe those others who surrounded her, and continually told her a different story. Lucia was an angel, but she had always been an old fuss-budget, making you walk to save carfare and foolish things like that. And Joan was so businesslike she leaned over backward about paying bills. They were nice girls, but they were just fussy. All these things they talked about never came her way.

There swept over her that deep understanding of the feelings of others that was so large a part of her, an intuition revealing to her their every thought. Her heart contracted with fear and pity and love, just as she could see Lucia's heart contracting. The real concern and hatred of unpaid bills that was Joan Stillman's became comprehensible to her.

And so she forgave them for their nagging. No one else ever told her all these disagreeable things. No one. But they meant well. They were just worrying about things they didn't understand. She knew the world so much better than they did.

And she had no wish to turn back or to change in any way her mode of living. Certainly not. Why should she? She had become too much the woman William Dvorak had taught her to be—William Dvorak and the other people of Hollywood who had fed that ego until it had crowded out everything else.

There were many people in Hollywood like Lucia and

Joan—and Mickey. But Sharon's like did not attract them because people like Joan and Lucia and Mickey do not settle upon the honey-pot. And the people like Pepper O'Malley and William Dvorak and Stanley Craig do.

The telephone buzzed.

Joan back at the desk was bent above columns of figures. And Lucia had closed her eyes. Sharon looked at them a moment in impatience, then she lifted the hoop-skirted lady and answered the phone herself.

They heard her: "Oh—oh, hello, Marie! . . . Yes, I am. . . . Yes, I do. What's it like? . . . Really? Oh, that sounds marvelous! But you must send it up this morning, because I'm going early."

She banged up the receiver and turned on the two women, her eyes black, both hands flung out in a gesture of complete exasperation. "Now, doesn't that show you? Here you fuss and stew and spoil my whole morning and tell me Marie's going to sue, and she calls up and wants to send me up a lovely white sport-frock she just got in today for me to wear on the yacht. Did you ever hear anything less like what you've been saying? And I expect all the rest is just about like that, too."

She leaped out of bed and into Lucia's lap.

For all she looked so queenly upon the screen, she was after all a little thing. Now she put both hands about Lucia's chin, and brought the girl's face to hers. Everything about her was beautiful and alive and gleaming with joy. She had turned on the full voltage of her charm to get her own way without unpleasantness.

"Lute, don't scold."

"Whose yacht are you going on?"

"William Dvorak's."

"Alone?"

Sharon giggled, pulling Lucia's face around to her by the tips of her ears. "No, love, not by myself. There's a whole party going. I shall be well chaperoned. Come along yourself, if you like."

"No, thank you," said Lucia.

"B'r-r-r." Sharon shimmied her shoulders in pretense of a chill. "You're not very friendly to poor old Bill, are you? And he's such a darling. I should think you'd like him. He's so intelligent. And he's so good to me. Well, I shall be perfectly safe, dear. Don't scold any more. You're right. You're quite, quite right. I'm a bad, naughty, extravagant girl. I will be good. Oh, I'll be very, very good! I promise. Just this one party—and then if it'll make you and Joan happy—I'll start in and be as economical as—you are."

"Don't have the party, Sharon," begged Lucia, her eyes full of tears, "please don't. Give it up. That's a good place to start. I begged you not to buy this great house. I begged you not to keep an army of servants. I've begged you not to entertain with these expensive parties. You won't listen. But you will now, won't you? Anybody has to make sacrifices to begin with. You haven't sent out the invitations. Take that money and start to pay some bills."

Sharon's face grew softer and more radiant. "Lute, you're seven kinds of a sweet angel. I know that. You always were. And I'm at least seven kinds of a devil. I'm made differently. But I've got to have this

one last party. My heart's set on it. I've told every one. And you know, Lute, though people pretend to be so crazy about me—I know they don't love me. I have to keep them in their place. I have to make them look up to me."

"Oh," Lucia was crying openly now, "everybody is crazy about you, Sharon! They want to love you. But they can't love you if you think only of yourself. That never wins love. You didn't use to be like that. You always promise wonderful things, but you only do them for the people who hang on to you. Some day, you're going to see where self can lead——"

"I know," said Sharon, her eyes narrowed and her lips sullen again, "but—I'm me. Joan, call up Pepper and tell her to come over here quick and help plan my masquerade. Pepper's the life of the party—before, during, and afterwards. By the time she gets here, she will be full of bright ideas."

Joan went toward the telephone reluctantly.

"Please—Sharon"—Lucia held out her hand—"don't. Just for a lot of people you don't care anything about——"

"Oh, but I do!" Sharon's eyes flamed again, that flame of being almost too much alive. "I adore people. I won't be alone. Now shut up. I won't hear any more croaking."

"All right. But the time's going to come— Oh, I don't want to preach, my darling! But the time's going to come when you won't have such an easy chance to get sense into your head. When you'll have to——"

A parlor-maid came through the farther door and Lucia caught back the harsh words unspoken.

"Miss Kimm, there's a Chinaman here to see you. He says you told him to come," she said disdainfully.

Sharon gave a squeal. Flew across the room. Into the hall. The butler at her call conducted up and into the bedroom a small and very wrinkled Chinaman in decent black. He did not once glance at the marble loveliness under the black georgette. But Lucia, who could never understand Sharon's lack of shame, flung a negligée of silver cloth about the bare shoulders.

In his hands the Chinaman held a small package. Sharon snatched it.

It contained a square tapestry, of Oriental silk, dynasties old. On it, with the artistry of the ages, was embroidered a great peacock. Its eyes were rubies. And the feathers of its spread tail sparkled with tiny emeralds and sapphires, glowed with jade and turquoise. Threads of silver and gold melted so delicately in its throat that one could imagine it drank of moonbeams.

"You got it for me, Wong?" said Sharon softly. "The one the Empress had? I must have it."

"Sharon!" Lucia cried out. The tall secretary took a step forward.

But all the softness, the understanding had fled from Sharon's face. Her eyes were dangerous. She walked across to the desk and took up the feathered pen.

Lucia's hand touched the tip. But there was a regal something about Sharon Kimm. As her eyes met Lucia's they had an aloofness that forbade even that intimacy to go further. Lucia moved back.

With furious haste Sharon wrote the check. Only on the last letter did that cold spot of fear shake her hand

so that the final "m" was blurred and trailing. She tossed it to the little Chinaman, who stood with his black felt hat in his hand.

He picked it up. He did not even look at it. Went out silently.

"How much was that check for?" asked Joan Stillman, and for the first time her voice was shaking.

"Only ten thousand dollars," said Sharon Kimm, caressing the peacock's moonbeam throat. "Oh, what a bargain!"

"Undoubtedly," said Joan Stillman. "But you have only one hundred and sixty-five dollars in the bank."

Sharon Kimm raised indifferent eyebrows. "Well—tomorrow's pay-day, isn't it? I'll make them give me an advance at the studio."

Joan's eyes met Lucia's—pleadingly. And Lucia, trembling now, girded herself to begin the losing battle anew.

There was a clatter of feet in the hall. A whistle. The door banged open. Pepper O'Malley in a red-and-white sport-dress came prancing in. Her eyes kept time to her feet. She looked the spirit of jazz—the firefly of desire.

"Well," said Pepper O'Malley, "where do we go from here, girls, where do we go from here? Are we going yachting or are we not? I only ask for information. I have me jolly old sailor togs all packed and says I, ahoy for the ocean blue! If there is anything I love over a week end, it's yachting."

Sharon laughed and Lucia knew the last hope had fled.

The jester was again at the helm.

But when Sharon had disappeared into the dressing-room, and only her laughter and Pepper's could be heard, Lucia sat down on a low stool beside Joan.

"Would you care to show me those figures and things, Joan?" she said. "How much does it cost to keep up this house? How many servants is Sharon keeping now? And—what's she spending all her money for, anyway?"

Joan Stillman sighed. "Oh, it's hard to explain, I suppose, Miss Morgan. Sometimes I hardly blame Sharon. It's criminal the way people prey on her—always trying to get money out of her, always trying to get her to spend more and more.

"And it seems almost impossible to spend her income—to be so much in debt on a salary of three thousand dollars a week. No wonder the world can't understand when it hears about such people going into bankruptcy, or dying without leaving much of anything, or finishing in pictures with hardly enough to live on.

"It's—it's just that things are done so recklessly. Miss Kimm would have plenty, even to live the way she does, if she'd conserve part of the time and not waste—waste—waste."

She checked the list before her.

"This is such a very big house. It costs so much to keep it up, and the grounds are such an expense. We pay a lot of top salaries, for Miss Kimm wants the best people, and they always charge people like her more because she shows that she doesn't understand about money and isn't businesslike.

"We keep a good many servants. It's necessary. The butler, the chef, a kitchen-maid, two housemaids,

two chauffeurs, a footman, a head-gardener and three under-gardeners, and two grooms at the stables. Then of course Miss Kimm has two personal maids, and—myself. It seems a good many, doesn't it? The salaries come to over fifteen hundred dollars a month.

"And to feed that many, and the horses—and the upkeep of the cars——"

"Cars?"

"Besides the Rolls, of course Miss Kimm has that new little Deussenburg roadster she bought. It's quite a fad now for a woman to have her own sport-car, you know, to go with her sport-clothes, I guess. It was an expensive foreign car—ten thousand dollars. And it costs so much to run it. And then there's the big Locomobile touring-car—that's sort of a house car, for the maids when they shop, or for me, or for her friends, when they come to visit her. She had those English people here a month—they used it—and the horses.

"Then her clothes. I think this year, without any jewels, or without the chinchilla coat, her clothes cost her at least fifty thousand dollars. That's with shoes—she has them made to order in Paris—and her hats, stockings, and underwear, and her evening wraps, and negligées. It seems a great deal.

"So you see our expenses—with the interest on the house and all—come to about a hundred thousand dollars a year. And that's without the cost of her trips to Europe. She travels like a queen, Miss Morgan, taking all those people along. And when you add fifty thousand for a necklace, and thousands for cars, and twenty thousand for a chinchilla coat—and the redecorating of the house—that cost thirty-

four thousand with the new furniture we bought—it doesn't leave anything but debts, does it?"

She paused, then with a rush, "And she's charitable. Oh, she is! And generous. She's always giving. She gives enormous sums to charities all the time. To the Children's Hospital and the Orphanage. She can't bear to turn any one down. And she—she buys things for people. She gave the Disabled War Veterans five thousand dollars the other day. People expect those things of her. She has so many demands like that upon her."

The shower in the sunken bathroom beyond tinkled.

"She had a soft-water system put all through the house, too," said Joan Stillman. "It cost thirty-seven hundred dollars to install it. She said she couldn't stand the hard water on her skin."

They were silent, their faces sad and grave.

From the dressing-room they could hear Pepper O'Malley in the midst of a very funny story about a famous star, and Sharon's laughter, throaty and sweet, coming in constant response.

"Does—Sharon go yachting with Mr. Dvorak often?" asked Lucia very casually.

"No. This is the first time."

"Is Pepper going?"

"Oh, yes, I think so."

"Well," said Lucia, "I wish the boat would go down and nobody be saved except Sharon."

CHAPTER XX

WILLIAM DVORAK'S yacht was well known along the Pacific coast—a luxurious boat with a reputation for speed. It was the finest craft of its kind in San Pedro harbor and it was pointed out to visitors partly because it belonged to William Dvorak and partly because of its size and beauty.

His yachting parties were famous, too, and the wise ones spoke of them with a knowing smile. Pretty hot parties the old boy gave when he got away from shore where there was no chance of any one's seeing him. He and Stanley Craig occasionally disappeared for week ends on board the Seagull and scandalous rumors drifted back. But they were only rumors. It is difficult to prove anything concerning a yacht that is miles from shore. William Dvorak was scientific about those things.

It was Sharon's first visit to the yacht; as a matter of fact it was her first trip on any yacht. It had taken Dvorak some time to persuade her. She was aware of the opportunities it might afford him for a climax which she felt impending and had been skilfully avoiding.

"I can't go," she had said. "You know how people talk. They talk enough about me as it is, and they're always talking about you and your week ends on the yacht. If I went with you it would start a perfect flood of gossip."

Dvorak shrugged. He knew that was not her reason. "Gossip can't touch you, my dear," he said coolly, "as long as there's no truth in it. Besides, Sam and Lena Hirtfeltz will come. Isn't that sufficiently respectable chaperonage even for you?"

As she dressed for dinner in her stateroom, Sharon was glad that she had come. The scene with Joan and Lucia had left a cloud upon her spirits. Here, as the boat skimmed over the waters like a giant bird bearing her along, she felt free of all that. A certain immunity from every-day, earthy things was here. She felt recklessly eager for a good time, for amusement that would wipe out that lingering sense of depression.

To Mina, her maid, arranging her hair, she said, "Yachting is marvelous. Everybody should have a yacht. It's really the only way you can get away from people. Mr. Dvorak has always said that; but I never realized it before."

Her eyes rested on the mirror, on her own image, and behind it the tiny but exquisite stateroom. It had surprised her, that room. It was hung with taffeta in her favorite orchid tones. The appointments were perfect; everything she could need or want was provided. There were orchids on her dressing-table and on the desk. Smoke from an incense burner gave out a new and enticing fragrance.

She dressed with care. She didn't know who else was to be of the party, besides Sam and Lena. It didn't matter. They would be interesting, and they would amuse her. She stood up and surveyed herself. The gown she wore made her look as she felt. Its heavy peacock-green sequins held it close against her body, and

it was patterned in more sequins in roses of a deep red, so that her white back and shoulders seemed to emerge from green and scarlet flames. Mina put a comb in her hair, a tall fanlike red comb, and it gave the last note of exaggeration to the picture.

A knock. It was Ito, the obsequious Japanese major-domo of all Dvorak's establishments.

He studied her approvingly. "Mr. Dvorak, he say I tell you dinner is ready. Mr. Dvorak, he say, this time Miss Kimm, she is the boss. You get orders from Miss Kimm. You do everything she tell you." He withdrew, smiling.

Sharon went into the salon. It was full of orchids, too. A Japanese boy in white appeared instantly at her side with a cocktail and she stood with it in her hand, unnoticed for a moment, looking over the people gathered to await her coming. Sam Hirtfeltz, buried in a newspaper. Lena, hands folded across her fat lap, looking on with that placid smile of hers, totally unable to see evil. Tall blonde Mabel Laurence, not so very long from the Follies, and the square-jawed director who had seen her there and brought her to Hollywood to make a film star of her. At the far end of the salon stood Dvorak, talking to his art director, and to the art director's sweetheart, a little English dancer, as vibrant and graceful as a bird. Pepper was curled on a divan, beside a scenario writer whom Dvorak had lately discovered, a handsome boy with gray eyes and a sensitive mouth.

Something about the young turn of his head made Sharon think suddenly of Mickey, and she drank her cocktail, grateful for its exhilaration.

Dvorak saw her then, and came across to her. All his coldness had fled. This was a new Dvorak to Sharon. He looked excited and triumphant, as if for this one evening he had slipped his bonds. She had never seen him before, except when he lost his temper on the set, without the amused ironic smile somewhere behind his eyes and hovering about his lips.

"Do you like your room?" he asked, bending over her hand. Sharon had never quite lost the thrill of having her hand kissed in that stately way.

"I adore it. It's perfect."

"I had it done for you—months ago," said Dvorak very quietly. "And only now you've—honored me by coming to occupy it. No one else has ever used it. I wanted it to be ready and worthy of your coming. Of course it isn't worthy. Nothing could be worthy of your beauty. You're too beautiful tonight. You must know how dangerous it is."

Sharon laughed at him. "Yes? I'm not afraid. I've always been able to take care of myself. I like danger. All women do."

The dinner was very gay. Every one there, except Lena Hirtfeltz, drank a good deal too much of the champagne. And yet no one was drunk. A reckless freedom possessed them. Restraint lies heavily a great deal of the time upon people who are always under observation. Given a chance, they naturally play with more abandon than ordinary mortals. Dvorak was a host beyond compare. He talked more lightly and more amusingly than was his custom. The feast itself, with its epicurean dishes, was not unlike the feasts in Dvorak's pictures.

Before long, Mabel Laurence dropped her acquired English accent and grew frankly Kansas. Sam Hirtfeltz lost his shyness and was telling the little English dancer a long and rather pointless story of his youth, at which she laughed with more and more gaiety. Pepper was all but sitting in the young scenario writer's lap.

When they had finished dinner Ito brought liquor in tiny red glasses.

Dvorak took his and said, "I don't want to brag about my own wines. But in this day of the bootlegger I can't let you drink this without telling you what it is. When I bought it in France years ago, they told me it was part of the wedding wines of Napoleon and Marie Louise. There were only a few bottles, and I saved one for some very special occasion. This is it. I want you to drink with me to the most beautiful woman in the world. The wine may have been intended for the Empress, but it has found a diviner mistress."

Sharon flushed with delight. And the little English dancer leaned across Sam Hirtfeltz and said, an affectionate hand on Sharon's arm, "That's right, too. He's got the right idea, the old boy has. I never saw you before, but I think you are the most beautiful woman in the world. Must be pretty nice to be the most beautiful woman in the world, eh?"

After dinner, Lena Hirtfeltz, yawning frankly, went away to bed. The sound of throbbing music came from somewhere—Hawaiian music, played outside in the shadows. The little English dancer shoved aside a chair or two, and began a graceful little dance, the flying draperies of her gown whirling about her body, floating

up until the laces of her pretty lingerie flashed out. They applauded her tumultuously, and she sank down on the art director's knee.

"Come out on deck," said Dvorak quietly to Sharon. "I have something I want to show you."

Mina brought her a Spanish shawl, of the same green-blues and rose-reds as her dress, and she wrapped it about her. The night was still and cool. There was no moon, but the stars cast a brittle light over everything. There was no land to be seen anywhere. The world was theirs, all of it that existed tonight.

Sharon Kimm sank into a deck chair. Dvorak took a small box from his pocket and placed it in her hand. Sharon held the ring up against the light from the port-hole behind her. It was a color she had never seen—liquid, green fire. Almost white sometimes—again a pure ice-green. She had never beheld anything quite so beautiful.

"What is it?" she asked breathlessly.

"It's a green diamond." He was cool now, but desperately cool, like a man who plays for very high stakes and in spite of the gambler's fever must keep his head. "I've been looking for one for you for a long time. It's your stone. There are only a few. Do you like it?"

"I adore it," said Sharon Kimm.

She put it on her finger. Held her slender hand up to the light. "It's the loveliest thing I've ever seen in my life. But—I can't take it. I mustn't."

"Don't be silly," said Dvorak. "Of course you can take it. It's not necessary to tell the world I gave it to you. You've allowed me the pleasure of making you gifts before."

"But nothing so—expensive as this," said Sharon.

"What difference does the expense make? Don't be provincial, Sharon. You're quite able to buy green diamonds for yourself, if you care to. That's not the point. The point is that I've taken some time and effort to give you pleasure. Don't disappoint me."

Sharon stood up, restless, moved into the shadow by the rail, nearer the water, and he followed her. She wanted the diamond. It was so perfect.

The Hawaiians had begun to play again—the haunting Limehouse Blues. One of them crooned it and the words floated over—"Rings on your fingers, and tears for your crown." Sharon shivered. Something drew her gaze and she looked up to find Dvorak's face very close to her, infused with passion and pride. It held her; and the night and the music faded.

"You belong to me," he said harshly, not touching her, but letting his eyes blaze into hers. "You belong to me. Some day, you'll come to me. We belong together. Don't ever forget that for a minute. We understand life as people don't understand it today. I'll give you everything in the world—everything to make you more beautiful. I'll make a queen of you. I don't want you till you're ready. Until you understand how magnificent life and love could be for us together. Until you know that I could show you the world, and make you happy. I don't want you until then. Half the joy would be gone. But—you'll come."

It repelled her and yet her mind was stirred with an intense curiosity. There would be terrific excitement, supreme splendor, in such a life as that. She was dazzled for a moment, swayed toward him dizzily.

And in that instant, the wind—which had been blowing away from them—changed, and began to bring to them the scent of the sea. Changed as the wind had changed to save Joan, another maid, at Orleans. The tang of it was in Sharon's nostrils, and little drops of spray touched her lips, so that she could taste the salt of it. And with a great inward throb she remembered that day in the sands at the Swimming Club, and the wet salt kiss—the first kiss Mickey had ever given her—and the evening afterwards when they sat together on the veranda and watched the moon upon the sea.

A wave of longing so strong that it was like a physical pain swept over her. The pulse clamoring in her ears seemed suddenly to be singing—"Roses will die with the summer-time, when our paths shall be far apart. But the one rose that dies not, in Picardy, is the rose that I wear in my heart."

With something that was very like a sob, she took the ring from her finger and put it back in Dvorak's hand; and catching her shawl close about her, for she was suddenly cold, she fled down into the little orchid cabin and flung herself across the bed, weeping as though her heart would break.

CHAPTER XXI

PERHAPS it was the memory of that evening which made Sharon rush after Mickey when she saw him on the Boulevard a few mornings later. She had been in the telegraph office, and as she came out she caught a glimpse of him, in his golf togs, a rough-coated Irish terrier at his heels.

She had seen Mickey often enough on the Boulevard before. Two people cannot live in Hollywood without meeting. But this time she crossed the sidewalk to him swiftly, put a timid hand on his arm. He stopped, looked down at her, and she could see what the encounter meant by the way his mouth twisted and his eyes grew darker.

"Hello!" said Sharon Kimm. Because of a pleading softness in her wide-open eyes she looked less like the great Sharon Kimm and more like the girl Mickey had first loved. "Hello, Mickey! Are you coming to my birthday party? Did you get the invitation?"

Mickey smiled down at her, his nostrils quivering. "I got it. But I'm not coming. Did you think I would?"

"You might," said Sharon, with that startling sweetness of which she could be mistress when she chose. "It's my birthday. You needn't always be so rude to me. We might at least be good friends. There isn't any use being so—so mean."

Mickey shook his head. "I'm not mean. But I don't want to be your friend. I'm not at all interested in being your friend. I want to be your sweetheart, your husband, something like that—but not your friend. We've been all over this so many times, dear. And that's the way it is, you see."

Sharon's eyes were as blue as the sea. It was good to hear the sound of his voice again, and to see the little twisted smile.

"Oh, Mickey, don't be so stupid! I miss you terribly. First you go off to the South Seas for months on end and never write me a line. And then you come home and never come to see me, as though I had the plague or something. Are you afraid of me?"

"Yes—of you and me," said Mickey. His heart was beating so that he could hardly speak. The sight of her! The loveliness of her, here on the Boulevard, in the clear morning light. She was wearing, as it happened, a little dress of checked gingham that looked, to his masculine eyes, very simple and inexpensive, in spite of the silken flowers climbing from its hem toward her waist.

"Well—that's ridiculous," said Sharon, and she put up her round chin, and grew very imperative, "and I'm simply not going to have it any longer. Just because you can't have what you want. How selfish you are! What do you do with yourself all the time?"

"Oh, I work, and I live in a very old and very disreputable brown bungalow up in Laurel Cañon: the one Benny Walsh built. And I have a Chinaman who can cook but who doesn't mind a little dust about the house. I've been playing a lot of golf and tennis. I'm

getting to be rather good at tennis. And—oh, yes, I have a flower garden. I dig in it. It's a very simple and commonplace existence. But—those are the things I find worth while. I'm afraid it bores you even to hear about it."

"Now you're being Irish and sarcastic," said Sharon, "but I don't care. Please come to my birthday party, Mickey? Please?"

She was quite close to him in the crowds that passed back and forth on the sidewalk. In the gingham frock and the wide-brimmed straw hat with flowers upon it, she looked young again—pathetically young. There was something tragic about her face, as she pleaded—the tragedy of mistaken youth. How different she was, the wildness gone from her eyes, the pose forgotten! The little hand, bare of rings, that lay on his arm was the hand of a child. He covered it with his own.

"Do you really want me to come, Sharon?" he asked. "Really?"

She nodded.

The raw note of an automobile horn sounded close behind them. Sharon started. The Rolls-Royce had pulled up to the curb. The crowd slowed up, began to stare, first at the car, then at Sharon Kimm.

"I must go," she said hurriedly; "there's my car. I have a million things to do. I'm buying clothes for the next picture, too. Twenty-one changes, if you can imagine that. I'll see you at the party. Be sure now."

In the car she sat rigid. Why had she done that? Well, why not? Why shouldn't she and Mickey be friends? Why couldn't they find some compromise? Mickey—Mickey—Mickey—her heart beat the name.

Oh, that was all very well! But Mickey was so stubborn. It was ridiculous to expect her to marry him and live on his salary. Three hundred dollars a week. Just one tenth of what she earned. Why, that wouldn't keep her in gloves. It was too silly. Twenty thousand dollars a year might seem a lot to some people, but compared with Sharon's hundred and fifty thousand it looked small enough.

She remembered something her father had said to her, years before, when her mother had been gone from them only a little while.

It was on a Sunday, a warm dusty Sunday. They had gone together to the park. Sharon Kimm in a faded gingham dress, none too clean, and her father in his shiny suit and old straw hat, burned yellow by the suns of many summers.

They had walked along beside the lake, watching the boats. Sharon wanted very much to ride in a boat, but she didn't even ask. There wouldn't be any money to ride in a boat. There was never any money for anything.

They walked on alone in the dusty paths of the hillside behind the park. Her father was singing to himself. He sang to himself often in those days. And it was always the same song:

“Wait till the sun shines, Nellie,
When the clouds go drifting by.
We will be happy, Nellie,
Don't you cry.
Down lovers' lane we'll wander,
Sweetheart, you and I.
Wail till the sun shines, Nellie,
By and by.”

She could hear it still.

Then without warning he had said, "Sharon, honey, don't you ever blame your mama. It wasn't her fault. It was my fault. I never could give her the things she wanted, the pretty things she had a right to. I could never seem to make enough money. That's why it was my fault. Don't you ever go blaming your mama, Sharon."

It would be like that if she married Mickey. He would never be able to make enough money, would never want to make enough, to give her the things she craved. He didn't see life as she saw it. His brown bungalow and his garden and his dogs and his tennis rackets!

But she wanted him in her life; she wanted him badly. And Sharon Kimm had grown unused to wanting anything and not getting it.

CHAPTER XXII

MADAME took a final stitch, patted a fold of drapery into place and rose wearily from her knees. Mina, whose hands usually were so swift and sure but now trembled a little, hooked the headband. Josephine, the second maid, trying hard to keep back tears, fastened the last bracelet and snapped shut a purple jewel-case. Then the three of them stood back and regarded their handiwork.

It had been a terrible hour.

Sharon had gone from open rage to a silent white fury. Everything about the costume was wrong. She wouldn't go to her own funeral in such a rag, much less to a ball. Madame was a stubborn old fool, who had made her look ridiculous on this one night of all nights when she most desired to be beautiful. As for Mina and Josephine, they were morons—that was the most charitable thing you could say for them.

Her eyes never left the mirrored walls of the dressing-room adjoining her bedroom, and she threw into arraying herself the passion of a pagan priest adorning an idol. It became a rite.

Only Pepper's continual witty soothing, lard-thick with those compliments which she knew so well how to pay, kept Sharon from stamping the whole thing beneath her feet. And at that, she was not too patient with Pepper. Once or twice the remarks she flung over

her shoulder, cutting and derisive, reminded Pepper most unpleasantly of Diane Lamartine.

It was the night of Sharon's birthday ball and the whole house had been in an uproar since six o'clock that morning. Joan and Pepper and Lucia had worked without ceasing, superintending the staff of workmen and servants. The place had been full of men from the florist shops, from the caterers, electricians from the studio, and several boys obeying the direction of a young art director with a little dark mustache, very languid and bored behind his thick glasses.

But this hour of dressing Sharon had been most trying.

Madame ignored her during the entire proceeding. She might have been dressing a doll stuffed with sawdust, for all the attention she paid to Sharon's storming. She had had too many experiences with temperament and temper in Hollywood to allow them to upset her. Often, she had sewed marvelous gowns on Ruby while that young lady had a form of hysteria not far from delirium tremens. They were a lot of excitable children and not on any account to be taken seriously.

And as she and the two maids stood back to look upon the result of their labors, an unwilling smile softened Madame's impassive features. It was a pleasure to dress Sharon Kimm. Despite her arrogance and her biting tongue and her inordinate vanity, the finished product gave satisfaction.

Madame had conceived the costume. She and Pepper had found the inspiration in that picture of Trojan Helen by Jacques Louis David that hangs in the Louvre. So now Helen stood before them, the cause of

that romantic war, reincarnated in Hollywood and the twentieth century.

The robe of palest-yellow silk fell from her shoulders to her feet in ineffable grace. Through it her body gleamed in cloth of gold that fitted her as perfectly as the skin of a snake. About her waist lay a girdle of flexible beaten gold, held together by a single topaz.

Her hair was loose except for one heavy strand banded about her forehead by a fold of golden cloth. Upon her bare feet were sandals of beaten gold and topaz and diamonds. About her throat hung a single strand of topazes, that rested just in the white rise of her bosom. In her hand she carried a little fan of golden gauze, and when she raised it, looking out with half-shut eyes, her face was soft and sensuous and divinely golden—a ruinous face like that which launched a thousand ships and laid great Troy in ashes.

“All I’ve got to say,” drawled Pepper O’Malley from the chaise-longue by the window, “is that if Helen of Troy had been dressed by Madame, the Trojan War wouldn’t be over yet. You sure know your onion, Madame.”

“Is it all right?” asked Sharon.

“You’re the queen’s nightshirt,” said Pepper, and uncurled herself and stood up, a perfect Puck in tight-fitting brown. “You’ll knock their eye out, old girl. Paris will certainly be obliged to present you with the golden onion, or whatever it is. My mythology is a bit rusty but my heart’s in the right place. And by the way, when you’re through with the topaz necklace you can give it to me, because you’ll never wear anything

so parsimonious as topazes again. And 'twill become me mightily, I wot."

They went out together for a last look at the preparations. The great night was about to begin.

"Aren't you going to get dressed?" Nadine Allis's mother asked timidly.

"I guess so," wearily said Nadine Allis.

"Where's Susie?"

"I sent her home. She worries me. Everything's ready."

Her mother looked at the costume spread upon the bed, brocaded hoop-skirts and delicate laces.

"You better wash your face and fix up some," she suggested. "Where's the wig? I—I thought there was a wig went with this."

"There is, but I'm not going to wear it. It hurts my head. What difference does it make? I'm sick of washing my face and fixing my hair. I'm sick of dressing and undressing. It's all I ever do. That's my life. Oh, how tired I am of it all!"

"Don't talk like that, Nadine," said her mother sharply. "You don't have to go, do you? What'd you accept for, if you felt like that?"

"I don't know. What's the difference. Might as well go as stay home. I suppose I accepted because everybody else did. Because I always do what everybody else does. Because I'm a poor damn fool. Don't ask me questions like that."

She began to take off her white sport-dress. Its white was not entirely fresh. She left it where it fell on the floor, a crumpled heap. Not one of the flappers

whose idol she was would have worn the shoes that she kicked beneath the dressing-table.

Her mother fluttered about placatingly. "You going to wear the diamond bracelets Irv brought you? They'll go nicely with that Marie Antoinette dress. She was fond of diamonds."

"Well, I'm not, and I'm not going to wear them."

In the face of her mother's silence, she went into the bathroom and washed her face with cold water and dried it with a rough towel.

"Well," her mother said at last, "then I'd better put them away. Where'd you put them? Somebody might steal them."

She was searching among the littered tables.

"Let 'em steal," said Nadine Allis. "What do I care? I don't know where they are. I put them around some place. I've got more diamonds now than I know what to do with. I feel like a pawnbroker's showcase every time I go out."

Nadine's mother went over and sat down on the narrow bench beside her. Her chin was trembling. Pain came through her faded eyes, burning her poor inadequate face until it seemed to shrivel.

"Nellie—don't take on so," she said, trying to keep her voice steady. "I—I meant to do what was right. We'd been poor—so long. I was so tired of scrimping. I can see it hasn't brought you real happiness. And I—I worry all the time. It'd kill me if you did—anything foolish. You wouldn't do anything—foolish, would you, Nellie? We've always been respectable folks and I've been so proud of you. Irv's kept his bargain. He's been awful good to you. He loves you."

Nadine looked at her. There were no tears, but a fog of weariness had settled upon her.

"Don't worry, mama. I won't do anything foolish. I asked Irv once—to let me go. He won't. He told me he'd—crucify me, if I tried it. Besides, you can't get happiness in this world, treading on other people's feelings. I know that.

"You made a mistake and I was too young to figure. It's funny. Some women care an awful lot for clothes and diamonds and fame. Sharon Kimm is like that. She was born like that. I thought once I did, too. But I know now I don't. Not really. I know now the only thing in the world I would have cared about was love, and a real home, and babies. Lots of them. But—not Irv's babies.

"But the public has had too many disappointments already. I know what I owe to the man who made me. At least, I married him. I know we stand for something; I'll carry on. I couldn't bring down a scandal on the people who have loved me. And on all the girls that think I'm perfect. It all has its price, always, doesn't it, mama?"

Nadine's mother was weeping, weak yaps like a small dog in distress. "Irv's a good man," she said.

Nadine looked at her. "Is he?" she said. "All right. Let's not talk about that."

"Is there—some other man, Nellie?"

Nadine's eyes fell. "Not in the way you mean," she said. "I've never spoken one word of love to him in my life. And I never will. I couldn't, while I was married. If Irv had let me go—don't worry, mama. I'm not going to do anything foolish. I guess I'm just too

much of a coward. But don't expect me to pretend a lot of stuff I don't feel. Don't ask me to make a fuss about things I hate."

She began to comb her hair carelessly. The short golden curls caught in the comb and she wrenched them free.

Her mother, still trembling, brought the costume, hooked it carefully, arranged the billowing skirts. Her old hands blundered over the work. She powdered the bobbed head, and brought a little wreath of roses from a drawer to fasten about it. She found a great fan of rose-colored feathers and put it, pleadingly, in Nadine's lax hand.

Nothing could keep Nadine Allis from being lovely. But there was something about the picture she presented now that gave the effect of a rose, just past its full bloom, whose petals may fall any minute. A very little more sharpening of the fine features, a very little more apathy of expression, and beauty would fall from her overnight.

She glanced at herself as at something she slightly disliked. Then she began to laugh.

She was still laughing when Irv Kohl, sheepish but pathetically pleased with himself, came from his rooms to join her. He was in costume, a perfect copy of Disraeli as played by a great stage actor.

When he heard her laugh, his eyes brightened. Then some tone in that laughter struck him, and a look of dogged purpose set every feature of his face. His eyes grew watchful, almost furtive.

His wife swept him a mocking curtsy, swaying down amid her brocaded billows to the floor. But as she

faced him again, her eyes were only sad, and she put her arm gently within his, as though she was as sorry for him as she was for herself.

When they had gone, Nadine's mother began again her search for the diamond bracelets.

CHAPTER XXIII

AFTERWARDS, when for ten days all Hollywood talked of little else than Sharon Kimm and the thing she had done, they dwelt lingeringly upon her birthday ball, that last skyrocket flare of display.

For Sharon's birthday party was an immense success.

From the first Hollywood had entered into the spirit of the thing. Hollywood seldom does things by halves, and if there was to be a costume ball, let it be a costume ball that would put all others to shame.

In the beginning, every one was a little startled by Sharon's engraved invitations. As a general rule there is a delightful informality, almost a Bohemianism, about Hollywood parties. You are apt at a dinner to find the men wearing anything from dinner jacket to puttees. So those engraved cards of Sharon's put the thing upon a plane of importance, in spite of the wisecracks of the uninvited.

And then, also, Sharon Kimm had a knack of making whatever she did stand out from the background of daily events. She had learned early from William Dvorak a certain quality of personal showmanship. She knew how to dramatize herself. The idea of a costume ball was one of her inspirations of showmanship. It caught the popular imagination. Costume pictures were at the top of their vogue. The facilities for historical research, where every studio has a department

devoted to that alone, were naturally enormous. Wardrobe departments were extensive and available. And so people threw themselves into preparation with fervor.

As they drove up to Paradise on the night of the ball, they could see the gardens, fairylike in a flood of artificial moonlight. Bowers were everywhere among the tall sycamores and the peppers. Lanterns swung in profusion.

On the swimming-pool, gaily lighted toy boats were afloat, and the electrician who had accomplished the miracle sat back grinning, as exclamations filled the air.

In the center of the lawn was a tent, brightly lighted within, brightly striped and beflagged without—the supper tent. The tennis-court had been carpeted and its wire fences hung with black velvet over which silver figures danced, and within were tables and wicker chairs heaped with cushions.

Lucia, who had gone home exhausted to dress, found the house and grounds crowded when she came back a little after ten o'clock. Lucia hadn't wanted to come to the ball. Her spirits labored under a weight of depression. But Sharon, as usual, had persuaded her against her will. And Lucia hated herself for yielding.

That was half the trouble. Nobody ever refused Sharon anything. Lucia should have stood firm. But when she saw she could no more stop the madness than she could stop a tidal wave, she felt a yearning to be near Sharon. In the costume of an early-Dutch masterpiece, she looked prettier than she had ever looked in her life. People stopped to tell her so. Lucia was popular chiefly because she was such a good listener and good listeners are rare in Hollywood.

But it didn't make Lucia happy. As the cost of such entertainment dawned upon her, she grew sick and apprehensive. It was ridiculous. It was criminal. When Sharon planned the thing it had seemed bad enough. But in reality the effect was barbaric and even vulgar in its ostentation. There were too many footmen in trappings of scarlet and gold. The banks of flowers that filled every room were too luxurious. The wines flowed too freely.

Everywhere was present the note of extravagance that rang through Sharon Kimm's entire existence. It was almost as if she were afraid people would not come unless she bribed them with superlative hospitality.

Over the music of the jazz orchestra—Sharon had brought it from San Francisco—laughter flowed. There were continual little squeals of delight from the women, exclamations of pleasure from the men, exaggerated tributes to stunning costumes.

Crowds moved up and down the stairs, gathering in groups in the hall. The drawing-room had been cleared for dancing, the walls hung with gauze, behind which banks of flowers bloomed, and through which the lights glowed with glamorous effect. The doors into the patio were open, a patio in which swarms of orchids seemed to grow in every corner, settling amid the palms and ferns like clouds of butterflies. The dining-room was a glittering bar, where white-coated bartenders turned out highballs and cocktails with incredible speed.

Long afterwards Lucia remembered the amber of those highballs, and the pale gold of the champagne, and the white-rimmed orange of the cocktails.

As she moved about she took anxious note of the

guests, pleased in spite of everything that all the really great people had come at Sharon's invitation. Probably no private party had ever boasted such a gathering.

She saw the screen's greatest comedian, as hump-backed Richard, gratifying for once his passion for tragedy. And she hid a smile at the sight of Tim Hale, still holding his own as the world's favorite cowboy in spite of the weight of years, but absurd and self-satisfied tonight in the silks and laces of a sixteenth-century French gallant.

Little Anne Sebring, in the white satin and pearls of Juliet, dashed through the crowd to kiss her and gasp excitedly, "Isn't it too wonderful! I've never had so much fun in my life."

In the distance she caught sight of Stanley Craig, spectacular and almost nude as one of the Pharaohs. Of course Stanley would take advantage of such an opportunity to show his famed sinews. She returned his wave coldly. She did not like Stanley Craig. She had never understood that brief passionate interlude with him which had come like a storm of lightning into Sharon's life and as swiftly departed. A casual and yet a desperate thing it had been, without preliminary or explanation, surrounded by an atmosphere of lightness, and yet with elements of danger that had left Sharon shaken through and through.

It was the only time Lucia had feared for Sharon, so far as men were concerned. During those days she cried into her pillow because it seemed a little unfair that Sharon should be subjected to such a battery of appeal, such a deliberate love-campaign as Stanley

Craig had launched against her. It was an attack few women in the film colony had resisted long.

But Sharon had resisted, as Lucia knew, though she had been sore pressed, close a time or two to yielding before that sheer call of the flesh. If Mickey had been there—but Mickey had gone away then. And suddenly the attack ceased as casually as it had begun; it had lasted in fact only a matter of days. But Lucia hated Stanley Craig for it and her eyes, as she watched him move through the crowd with that conquering way of his, showed her dislike.

The pageant continued to pass before her.

The greatest star of them all, in shining armor and white kid, stamped with golden fleur-de-lis, an idealized Maid of Orleans. How sweet and fine she was! How she had kept herself unspotted from the world! Yet she had done it only by complete retirement, by an almost conventual seclusion from the ordinary joys of living. And sorrow had not held its hand from her generous heart.

Thinking of her, Lucia wondered whether those among the great stars who were happy were not so in spite of their success with its burdens and temptations rather than because of it.

Behind her she heard voices. Sharon Kimm's name.

Margaret Vane, with her serene beauty, yet with something calculating underneath. Pearl Ward, mischief in every curve of her face, a saucy soubrette in ballet skirts. And with them—Lucia started—Mildred Rideout, haggard, bitter, worn—that same Mildred Rideout who had once ordered an extra girl named Sharon Kimm off the Savage lot.

How funny life was!

But Lucia didn't like any of the three women, so she moved away. If she had stayed, she would have heard something like this:

"How utterly lovely of Sharon to be Helen of Troy! Lots of girls would have thought it a little—boastful to appear as Helen, don't you think? I'm glad Sharon didn't feel that way," said Margaret Vane.

"Oh, I don't know." Pearl Ward cocked her black head on one side. "You don't hand yourself any raspberries, Mag, when you come as Mary Stuart. Mary was no slouch herself."

Margaret Vane ignored her. "Sharon is lovely. Just a little crude in type, perhaps, but what could you expect, with her ancestry, poor darling? And of course, you know it does worry me, loving her as I do, to see her getting just a wee bit conceited. I can't believe it, when people tell me she's becoming a regular egomaniac. I simply can't. The only thing is—I wonder if she realized how much she talks about herself? It's just a habit, and I suppose she doesn't realize how it sounds, but it's so difficult to get her to talk about anything but herself."

"What's your favorite subject?" asked Pearl with malice. "If there is anybody in Hollywood that can't be persuaded to talk about themselves, me included, I haven't met them. I noticed when you met Sharon tonight you took pains to tell her she was the divinest creature ever."

"You have to be polite," said Margaret.

"Oh, not always!" said Pearl, the tiniest edge on her voice. "If Sharon took a tumble tomorrow, I don't im-

agine you'd go out of your way to waste any of your sweetness on her."

"She wasn't so pretty when she was an extra girl on our lot," said Mildred Rideout suddenly.

"Well, any one could be beautiful in the clothes she buys herself," said Margaret Vane; "though Heaven knows how she pays for them. I heard in Paris, when I was over in the spring, that she spent twenty-five thousand dollars for things. She certainly spends a lot of money. I can't help wondering who's *paying the bills*—of course that's between ourselves—but you can't give parties like this for nothing. I'll bet it didn't cost less than five thousand dollars."

"I knew her when she didn't have a dime for car-fare," said Mildred Rideout.

Pearl gave her impudent laugh. "If this is going to become a meeting of the 'I knew her when' club, I'm gone. There are too many people here who knew *me* when."

She took Margaret Vane with her, and Mildred Rideout stood alone, her teeth still worrying her lower lip, her eyes bitter with scorn. She and Sharon Kimm had kissed when they met. Mildred Rideout had felt the curious eyes between her shoulder-blades, as they exchanged laughing courtesies afterwards. People were remembering the old story and viewing this healing of the breach with amused eyes. Mildred Rideout had come because it seemed wisest that the breach should be healed. Sharon Kimm was now a person. It meant something to be invited to her house, and Mildred Rideout had taken some tough blows since the old days.

But for all that, remembering the triumph Sharon

Kimm could not quite keep out of her eyes, Mildred Rideout wished she had not come.

Irv Kohl and Sam Hirtfeltz met in the library.

It was a beautiful room. True, most of its expensively bound books had never been opened. Nobody had ever taught Sharon to love books. Besides, she never had time to read. The life of a motion-picture star is one of the busiest of modern lives. Leisure in it is almost unknown. But it was the correct thing to have books in a library and so, when she bought Paradise, Sharon had given a book dealer a commission to furnish her shelves.

Tonight it served as a smoking-room for the men.

Irv Kohl was a little less sheepish, a little more pleased with himself as Disraeli than he had been earlier in the evening. Sam Hirtfeltz wore his evening clothes. At home, in untarnished splendor, reposed the Elizabethan costume his wife, Lena, had provided for him. He had actually gone so far as to put it on. But he would no more have appeared in it than he would have appeared as Adam.

"How's everything?" asked Irv Kohl, lighting a cigar with a sigh of relief.

"All right," said Sam Hirtfeltz. Trouble sat upon his brow, however, and Irv Kohl saw it.

"I hear Dvorak's latest ain't such a big hit as it might have been?" He had heard nothing of the kind, but it did no harm to find out all one could.

"So? I ain't heard nothing like that. It's grossed three hundred thousand in the first three months," said Sam Hirtfeltz, but he said it deprecatingly. He did not wish to seem boastful.

There was a comfortable silence.

"Irv, you'd say this was a pretty swell party, wouldn't you?" said Sam Hirtfeltz at last. "You go to lots more parties than I do. My Lena and I—we stay home with ourselves a good deal. It's better so when you got children like we got. You, with Nadine, now, that's different. We come tonight only because my wife, Lena, has got such a liking for Sharon. Women get queer notions. Lena she says she feels sorry for her. But I ask you, are most parties now got quite so much food and flowers and champagne as this one?"

Irv Kohl blew a cloud of smoke. "N-no, not quite so much. People spend lots of money giving parties nowadays in Hollywood, though. Poor little Morris Cohen give a party for Inez Laranetta cost him four thousand dollars—and what does she care for Morris Cohen? I told him that. Nadine used to spend lots. But—she don't give them much any more. Sharon, she always hits the high spots when it comes to spending. How's she going? I heard not so good."

Sam Hirtfeltz flushed and it was some moments before he answered. "Well—I wouldn't say that, Irv. Maybe not quite so good as last year. You know how it is. It ain't always easy we should get good stories for Sharon Kimm. The exhibitors' reports ain't quite so good lately. Last year they say—'Packed them in,' 'My patrons was knocked out of their chairs with this one.' Now—oh, she's making money for us! I guess maybe we put her back on the regular program pretty soon. No more superspecials. I gotta see what Bill thinks."

There was another silence, and Irv Kohl said, "Well, Bill Dvorak made her. I had her once on my lot. I couldn't see so much to her."

"If you come to that," said Sam Hirtfeltz, "don't somebody most always make everybody? Oh, nothing bad—I don't mean that. Just the way luck happens. There's a lot of luck in this business. We should kid each other. And—you think then, Irv, this party costs a lot of money? I try to tell Sharon she should save something. She can't always go on making so much like she makes now. Salaries ain't so high as they used to be, thank God."

Irv Kohl twisted his cigar around in the corner of his mouth.

"Sam, we both overlooked a good bet in that young fellow, Michael Reid, no?" he said suddenly. "My wife, she told me that, but I thought she was cuckoo. Right now, with all the women crazy about sheiks like they are and talking sex appeal, he could have worked in pretty good. They don't handle him right over to Allied. But they got him tied up like he's in a safety-deposit box. No salary to speak about that he's getting, either. An Irishman shouldn't ever handle business for himself; that's what I told him when I seen his contract."

Silence fell. Only the puff-puff of the cigars and the tinkle of ice melting in the highball glasses and the sound of distant jazz broke the stillness.

Stanley Craig was carrying at least three drinks too many. Two minutes after they took the floor, Pepper O'Malley was aware of it. He could still dance. But then, Stanley Craig could dance when he couldn't walk

or speak. But he danced with a little more abandon than he usually displayed in a ballroom.

Pepper, whose blond curls under the peaked brown cap, came only to his heart, smiled secretly as she felt him draw her close, with that caressing tenderness, as if he had been waiting all evening to dance with her, as if she were the only woman in that big room with whom he really cared to dance. Dear old Stan! She was terribly fond of him, but he didn't fool her any more. She had known him since he arrived in Hollywood, a penniless football hero bent upon being an actor. In fact, Stanley Craig was the man about whom she had once made a fool of herself. Well, she wasn't sorry. She'd had a good time doing it.

Knowing him as well as she had for all these years, Pepper gaged the three superfluous drinks by the sentimental smile on his lips and his passionate but not quite steady gaze.

"You're adorable, Pepper," he said, looking down at her. "You know, honey, I've got an awfully soft spot in my heart for you. You're one of the few people I really care anything about. Know that? You're a real friend. I'm your real friend, too. And I need real friends. Some day, I'm going to have a serious affair with you."

"What are you doing for the next fifteen minutes?" said Pepper, giggling. "No time like the present."

"Don't try to be funny," said Stanley Craig. "I'm very serious. Don't you still love me just a little bit, Pepper? You're such a darn sweet kid. You aren't hard-boiled like most of these women. Shopworn, that's what most of 'em are. Shopworn. Make me sick.

You're different. Nice little Pepper! I like the way you've stuck to Sharon and done for her."

Pepper looked at him suspiciously. She didn't like that "done for her" stuff. Was Stan kidding her? She had heard already tonight that she used Sharon for a meal-ticket, which was true enough but not pleasant.

Then, because she had always been curious about Stanley and Sharon, she began a little cross-examination.

In five minutes she had the whole story. It didn't surprise her. Nothing William Dvorak did could surprise her. The moral aspect of the thing never entered her head.

But she was stunned when Stanley went on, "And Pepper, I wouldn't say this to anybody but you, but we're pals. We're just a couple of old buddies, you and me. The old boy is off his nut about her himself. Just right off his nut. He'd give her the oil-wells and the bank and the whole works if she'd fall for him. Don't kid yourself. I know that old daddy."

Pepper's eyes snapped. What a close-mouthed little thing Sharon was in some ways. Perhaps she wasn't sure herself. Pepper decided it might be well if she told her what Stan had said. It would be a good card to have in the hole. A seed to plant in Sharon's mind in case things broke badly. Sharon was bound to need money pretty soon. The pace was too hot. Pepper, who had gone to Europe as her guest and enjoyed herself to the full, was a little worried of late for fear she had killed the goose that laid the golden eggs by encouraging too much extravagance. But even Sharon couldn't break Dvorak.

The music stopped. They went out into a little secret garden that Pepper knew. The white and purple iris stood in the moonlight like enchanted princesses. A fountain bubbled, and the stringed quartet in the tennis-court was playing something old-fashioned and tender, something that was not jazz. A love-song of another day, made to be played beneath a lady's window.

It was ridiculous, of course, knowing Stanley—and life—and men—as she did. But Pepper's heart began to beat faster. It was memory as much as anything. She had been so mad about him in those old days. They were long ago. She hadn't thought about them for years, until tonight, when the music and his presence brought them back.

His arm slipped around her and she yielded, first to his arms, then to his lips. A hot, sweet kiss.

"Little Pepper, my little friend," said Stan Craig, looking down at her tenderly, sentimentally. In the artificial moonlight, under the peaked cap, her face looked surprisingly as it had looked the first time he kissed her, when she was just seventeen.

"Gosh, I'm sick of this life!" he burst out. "I'm sick of women. I'm sick of booze. I'm not a bad fellow, Pepper. Honestly I'm not. It's the fool women. They won't let a man alone. I used to have different ideals than I've got now. But what I've seen of women, sending me their pictures without any clothes on and stuff like that—it's made me sick.

"I'd like to settle down somewhere, with a nice home to come to, and a wife that was a pal and a friend, and maybe have some babies. Why not?

"Pepper, let's get married."

Pepper O'Malley's heart stopped beating. But her brain continued to work.

"Let's get married, right now, tonight," said the man, kissing each of her fingers. "Would you?"

Pepper's brain said two things to her in rapid succession. "God help the woman who marries Stanley Craig!" And, "But if I were Mrs. Stanley Craig, all my troubles would be over. It'd be better than being Sharon Kimm's best friend. I could *stand* his chasing."

She was trembling with excitement, but she kept her head. She kept it so completely that when she went upstairs and slipped into her squirrel coat—the one Sharon had bought for her in Paris—preparatory to meeting Stan in his roadster, she put a full silver flask in her pocket. It would never do to let him get sober on the ride.

Lucia had been searching for Sharon in the crowd and finally she saw her, standing at the foot of the great stairway. And it seemed to Lucia that she saw Sharon Kimm, the Sharon Kimm of today for the first time.

How she had developed, this Sharon Kimm! Lucia was startled by the regal poise, the distinguished way she carried her golden body, and her haughty, gracious head. What a calm acceptance of homage! What a trick she had of turning the spotlight from even such a gathering as this and centering it upon herself! How all these people catered to her, bowed to her!

Not much in this Sharon Kimm of the girl Lucia had known in the past. Her eyes wandered about the palatial room, and she thought of other rooms where Sharon

Kimm had lived. The dingy sitting-room, where the Christmas-tree had stood. Their first one-room apartment in Hollywood, with its torn blinds and unshaded lamp. Even the garish living-room of the bungalow court they had so coveted.

Why, the florist's bill for this party would be twice as much as the year's rent on that bungalow!

What a beginning—to this! In a few breathless years. What chance had there been to build solid masonry beneath this glittering triumph?

From the moment the magic mantle of success had been thrown upon her, Sharon Kimm had lived in a wave of excitement that had left no time to develop the moral stamina with which to meet the rush of events. Her bizarre, alluring personality had sprung into being overnight, not by any ripening process that allowed mentality and understanding of life to keep pace with it. There had been no opportunity for Sharon Kimm to grow in spirit and in character as she had grown in position and fame and ways of living.

A sheer upward flight.

In personality, in position, she had become a queen.

In mind, in soul, how far had she come from the little girl in the house by the railroad tracks? What had she learned worth while since her mother died for a pink silk dress?

Lucia forced her way toward Sharon, and her heart was tender. But before she could reach her a man moved through the crowd and bowed over Sharon's hand. There was something entirely familiar about the figure, and yet something wholly strange. When he straightened up Lucia recognized William Dvorak. He

had carried out the tradition and come dressed as Napoleon. It suited him. He looked more attractive than she had ever seen him.

Sharon gave a laughing dismissal to the circle about her, and went with him into the patio. Lucia stood there watching them go.

Sharon had not seen William Dvorak since the yachting party. He had been kindness and tenderness itself to her the day following the episode of the ring. But the amused ironic smile had come back, as if he were laughing at her sentimentality, as if it were something childish, provincial.

Now they were both laughing, laughing at themselves and their make-believe finery.

"What a lot of idiots we've made of ourselves to please you!" he said. "I'm quite sure we wouldn't have done it for any one else in the world. You're a witch. I've always said so."

"Pooh!" said Sharon, and she rather enjoyed the half-frightened sensation that came over her. "You know you look stunning. You belong in some more picturesque age than this. I always knew it."

"Perhaps—perhaps," he said, and he took her hand and looked down at the lines in its palm, "perhaps that's because you knew me in some other, more romantic life. Perhaps we belonged to each other once before when 'I was a king in Babylon and you were a Christian slave.'"

"Or when 'I was a tadpole and you were a fish,' " said Sharon, half laughing.

"You were never a tadpole," said Dvorak, "but it doesn't matter what you were as long as you know that you were mine. Do you know it, Sharon?"

She still shook her head. "I—don't think I do," she said. "When I'm away from you, I know I don't. Only sometimes, things you've said keep pounding at my brain. When I'm with you—I don't want you to kiss me. But—I don't know."

A crowd of hilarious guests poured out into the patio, seeking Sharon to say good night. The party was beginning to break up.

CHAPTER XXIV

DON'T go," said Sharon Kimm softly to Mickey Reid.

The last stragglers had left in merry disorder. A quiet that seemed ghostly, after the hours of revelry, fell upon the big house. The lights were turned out, one by one, leaving that pale promise which is not quite dawn and not altogether darkness.

Sharon Kimm gave an order to the butler and went through the great hall to her downstairs boudoir. It was a wreck of dying flowers and scattered cigarettes and empty glasses. But Sharon only laughed as she collapsed in the gilt-and-brocade couch.

Her face was still sparkling. The night had been wine to her. The thought of certain people who had been there to witness her triumph added zest to this hour.

She had told Lucia that she loved people, that they were necessary to her, and she was right. But she had not told her that it was their homage, their admiration she loved. Perhaps she did not know it herself.

Her golden gown was crushed. Her hair had loosened and sprayed about her in deep thick waves. But she was as vital as she had been eight hours earlier.

"Why do you want me to stay?" asked Mickey Reid. He stood over her, half reluctant, half eager.

Sharon narrowed her eyes at him. "Oh, I hate being

alone tonight! Besides, half the fun of a party is talking it over afterwards. And Lucia is mad at me and went home and I can't find Pepper. Wasn't it wonderful? Wasn't every one gorgeous? Didn't every one have a good time?"

"And I'm to stay here—now—alone with you—just to gossip over your party? You do have the most extraordinary ideas, Sharon."

She rippled a laugh at him. Her eyes sought his. She was in a mood of warm yielding, of love for the whole world. She wanted a fitting climax to this greatest night of her life. Sharon was a little drunk with the fanfare of the evening—with the wine, and the music, and the flowers, and the color and fragrance of it all.

How handsome Mickey looked! Because it was warm his hair began to curl in a thick crest above his brow and ears. There was grace in the way he wore the plain black velvet suit, with its mantle swinging from his shoulders. The costume became him. His face wasn't modern like Stanley Craig's. It had a mobility, a suggestion of depths untouched, that belonged to no other man she knew. There was a sheen of youth upon him, and in this black velvet with the long fantastic dagger, he looked dangerous and as if he were at the end of his self-control.

"Who are you?" she asked drowsily.

"Cesare Borgia."

She gave an exaggerated shudder. "Such a wicked man!"

It would be nice if he took her in his arms, now. She would even like to feel at her own throat the point

of that shining knife. If he would only forget everything except that he loved her! No other man could make her heart beat as Mickey could.

Her eyes spoke to him of all these things.

And he answered, taking her close in his arms, their lips clinging, held in a burst of flame that left them dizzy.

It was a long time since they had kissed each other. Perhaps they had never kissed just such a kiss as this.

Their bodies melted together until, against the growing dawn, they seemed one creature. A love god.

"Oh, I love you so—Sharon! I can't forget. I never draw a breath that isn't all for you. My soul and my body and everything that is me cries for you all day—all night. Love me—love me. Give yourself to me for always. Marry me, Sharon. Never mind anything, only let's have our love."

The fire-white of her face cooled to rose. The blue that had crept through her eyes crept back. It would have been better if he had not spoken, had kissed his longing to her.

"I do love you, Mickey," she said, "in my way. But I guess I don't love you enough. What would you do if I married you? Would you expect me to live on your salary, or would you live on mine?"

"Sharon!"

"You see? You couldn't be a man and live on mine; and yours, though it would be enough for lots of women, isn't enough for me. I want everything money can buy. I want to live like this. I want the world. If you wanted to come here—and live my way——"

"Not even to get you, Sharon."

"Why must you make such a fuss? I love you and you love me. Maybe we could be married secretly——"

"A morganatic marriage, your Majesty? No, thank you." His voice was bitter.

"Oh, Mickey! Don't speak like that to me. I adore you. I can't live without you. I want you—now. If we can't marry—and yet if we must have love—wouldn't it be all right if I just belonged to you? I'd rather——"

"Don't say it," said Mickey Reid. "Don't! I'm only a human being and I love you so that my arms ache for you at night. But I'll be damned if I'll make you my mistress. I've asked you to be my wife. For my own sake, I couldn't make anything less than that of you. Sometimes, I could curse you for just a cheap woman who cares more for gewgaws than for love. And yet I know that I couldn't love you the way I do if you weren't worth loving, somewhere, down in the heart of you. Because I don't love you, Sharon, as men love cheap women. There's lots of that love. It's easy to find. Any man will give it to you. I love you—as men love truth, and honor, and courage, almost as they love God."

"Oh, Mickey," Sharon murmured, vibrating to his voice more than to his words, "don't talk. I never forget our love, darling. I never love any man but you. That's why I've never had another love-affair. Take me in your arms, Mickey, and tell me how much you love me."

He stood, fighting as he had never fought the Huns even at death-grips in the trenches.

"Kiss me," said Sharon Kimm.

But that kiss was never given.

A shadow had fallen in the doorway. William Dvorak stood there, his eyes upon them, his lips curved in a faint smile. He was a consummate actor—this poseur. So well did he carry the uniform of the Little Corporal that for a moment it seemed he must belong in it, must always have worn it.

"I came back," he said slowly, "for my cloak. I found I had left it."

Mickey Reid laughed. There was relief in that laugh, perhaps, and sorrow. But certainly nothing of mirth or joy.

Sharon Kimm looked at William Dvorak in the little silence that fell, and then she looked at the boy in black velvet, who stood across the room, where he had flung in his anger and his fear.

Perhaps some prescience told her that her choice some day would lie between these two, and that sooner or later it must be made—between them and the things and the loves they stood for.

But not tonight.

"Oh," she said, "your cloak! How funny that you should have left it! And—now it seems to be over your arm, doesn't it?"

"Yes," said William Dvorak.

"Well"—Sharon yawned because her senses were spinning with reaction—"I think as long as you did come back, I'll ask you to give Mickey a ride into Hollywood. He was just going to phone for a taxi."

"I should be delighted," said William Dvorak. Mickey made him a bow that more than matched his own.

The dawn was brightening as they left her. An opal dawn. Her great night was over. And Sharon Kimm, her face still puzzled and dreamy, went slowly upstairs and awakened Mina, sleeping in a chair, and was put to bed in her golden bed alone.

Ito opened the car door and allowed the two men to enter.

Mickey's hands were clenched at his sides, until the nails made half-moons of white. He wanted to take this man, in his triumphal uniform, out to the dirt and beat that ironic smile from his mouth with his two hands. The very thought made his muscles taut with elation. He could do it. He was young and strong and he gloried in it.

But he must not. Because he loved Sharon, he must not.

"You've known Miss Kimm a long time, haven't you?" said Dvorak, and his tone was the essence of formal courtesy.

Mickey glanced at him in the growing light, to see the smile of a man of the world who meets one who, if not quite an equal, must yet, because of circumstance, be treated as an equal.

Well, if that was the man's game, Mickey could play it with anybody. He happened to *be* a gentleman, and an actor as well.

"Yes," said Mickey, "I've known her a good deal longer than most of her friends, yourself included. I may flatter myself, but I think I know her rather better."

Dvorak raised doubtful eyebrows. "Perhaps. But

a director comes to know a star he works with very well indeed. I have an idea that I know Sharon's real nature and the things that she needs to make her happy as well as any one."

"That's very true"—Mickey lighted a cigarette with a steady hand—"and I know how much Miss Kimm owes to you." Dvorak glanced at him quickly, but Mickey's eyes were serene. "I can only hope that she will never be more deeply in your debt."

"Please don't say that," said Dvorak. "I think Sharon knows there isn't anything I wouldn't do for her. Fortunately I am in a position to do much for her. If a man cares enough for a woman, I suppose he isn't above making opportunities to help her. Sharon is a strange girl. Her whole happiness, her whole life, I might almost say, depends upon beauty—upon beautiful things—upon having money to do the things that she desires to do. I can't imagine her as the wife of a poor man."

The cords swelled in Mickey's neck. "Any more than I can imagine her the sweetheart of a rich one," he said. "I don't know that I can persuade her to marry me. But she has told me tonight that she loves me, and I think if she ever needs help, I am the man to give it to her."

Dvorak's eyes gleamed. "No doubt. Unless circumstances should be such that you hadn't the—means of doing so. I'm sure you know I don't wish you any bad luck personally, but I can't help hoping you won't persuade her to marry you. It would be fatal to her career and to her happiness—almost any marriage but particularly one with a young man who still has his

way to make in the world—as I’ve told her many times.”

The car drew up at the corner of Hollywood Boulevard and Cahuenga. Mickey saw a taxi and hailed it. He jumped out and Dvorak stepped down and stood holding out his hand.

“Good night,” he said. “I don’t see you often. It may be quite a long time before I see you again.”

“Probably,” said Mickey, and he moved over close to Dvorak, towering above him, and quivering with the feelings that tore him. “There is one thing I should like you to keep in mind,” he added. “I would kill with my bare hands any man who harmed Sharon.”

“The thought does you credit,” said Dvorak, “but it’s just a little melodramatic, isn’t it? Sharon’s a woman, a woman of the world. Surely she has a right to make her own choice in—any matter that might come up. I think we can safely leave things in her hands. Good night.”

“Good night,” said Mickey Reid. “I cannot help hoping that sometime we shall meet again.”

CHAPTER XXV

NO ONE was helping Sharon Kimm to pay her bills. The president of the Hollywood branch of the Los Angeles bank could have told them that. For they were not being paid.

As the president looked up from the columns of figures in front of him, his face was harassed and em-purpled.

"Why can't they behave themselves?" he said in a burst of wrath. "Why can't they act like rational human beings, instead of children, with their money?"

"Some of them do," said the cashier. "A lot of them do."

"Oh, I know, I know! Half of them. Less than that. The others—debt, debt, debt! They'll agree to pay anything—in the future. Talk about immorality in the picture colony! Debt's back of half of it. Debt and extravagance. We're getting so in this country we don't consider any kind of immorality but sex immorality. How can they expect to grow and develop and do the right things—with debt crushing the life out of them? How can they expect to be sound when they spend every cent they make and then some? It isn't only the extra girls, when they get hard up and have to have eating-money, either. My word! If a man earns a thousand dollars a week and works half the time, can't he *see* he's only earning five hundred? No,

he can't. He lives and operates on the basis that he earns a thousand dollars a week fifty-two weeks in the year. Can't a girl see that if she spends her income ahead of time on junk she can't help getting into trouble? Do they save up and put away a dime, when they're making big wads, for the lean days that always come, when they won't be making anything? No. If they make a big salary, a lot of 'em think they have all the money in the world. A gold mine. A bottomless bank-account. They want to show off, that's all.

"Maybe it *is* a lot of money. More than wise, sane, conservative men can earn. But when you buy fifty-thousand-dollar diamond necklaces and twenty-acre estates and twenty-thousand-dollar automobiles and go to Europe and order fur coats by the gross and keep ten servants and a stable of horses—well, that's the answer."

"You're thinking of Sharon Kimm," said the young cashier.

"Oh, am I?" said the president belligerently. "What a bright boy you are! Well, I am. I tried to warn her. I tried. Now everything's busted at once, just as it always does. They want to take her car away from her. Johnson's coming in here in ten minutes and I don't see what he can do but take back that house of his she bought out in Beverly Hills.

"They go and buy a house for a nickel down and forget there's ever going to be anything more to pay! And the real-estate agents get rich. And a Chink has a bum check of hers and he's going to sue. Won't listen. She owes everybody in town and you know—Sam Hirtfeltz is the best little guy in the world only he's funny

about money. I doubt if he'll help her any more. And she doesn't even know what it's all about. Can't see where she's got herself. But she will."

"What a fool she is!" said the cashier.

The president tipped back in his chair and grinned in excellent imitation of bland approval. "Well, well," he said, "is that so? A fool, is she? Yes, you're right. She is. A poor little ignorant fool. Aren't you sorry for her?"

"Not particularly," said the cashier. "I'm not sorry for anybody that can earn three thousand dollars a week."

"Oh, aren't you? What right has that inexperienced child with her wrong sense of values, her ignorance, to have control of so much money?

"Why, even if she'd married a rich man, or had become the sweetheart of some rich man, she wouldn't have so much money. Where else could such a thing happen, except in pictures? What foundation has she got for it? Isn't a sudden surplus of money to people who don't know how to spend it and have no talent for handling it always a disaster?

"And isn't Hollywood full of it? Aren't you old enough to know that excess in any direction is the most dangerous thing in the world? It makes crooks and criminals and liars and prostitutes and fools just fifty percent quicker than lack. It changes moral standards, it brings complete breakdowns, more than anything else in life.

"If you don't know that much—oh, get out! Get out. You don't even know what I'm talking about. Maybe I don't either. But I like that fool Sharon

Kimm. I like her, doggone it, and I'm sorry for her. As you go out, send Johnson in."

To the small, colorless man in the worn suit who came in, he said in the same tone, "Well, Johnson, I can't say I'm particularly glad to see you. Sharon Kimm's a friend of mine. But I don't see what else you can do. Poor ignorant fool!"

It is inconceivable that Sharon Kimm should not have realized what was coming—what was bound to come. But she did not.

She had looked into the sun so long that her eyes could not see the chasm beneath her feet. Drugged by flattery, she had come to think of herself as something almost godlike, above the fate of ordinary mortals. Pride had become her chief counselor. Vanity consumed her.

The optimism of the egotist, which claims the divine right of kings, had entered into her. Like a man who comes in time to believe his own lies, Sharon Kimm had been hypnotized by her own pose. She played off the screen, as she played on, a sort of omnipotent grande dame, forgetting entirely those things from which she sprang.

Hollywood talked much, in those days, of the extravagance and the vanity of Sharon Kimm. Watched her with curiosity and an impersonal regret. But it is never the fashion to take things seriously in Hollywood. Those who do are not sought as dinner guests. So long as there is a wise-crack to be sprung, a laugh to be raised, a new story about some great one to be told, why should one be serious?

Hollywood is interested in itself and in nothing else. But it prefers to be almost ostentatiously merry.

In regard to Sharon Kimm, Hollywood was frankly worried. It was to be hoped that nothing would happen to get into the papers. But there have been so many who skirt for years the maelstrom of ruin, so many who tremble daily upon the very brink of destruction and yet are never destroyed, that a sort of tradition has grown up in Hollywood that you can get away with a lot if you are witty, and popular, and successful.

Life is so fascinating, so filled with emotion of one kind and another, that the laws of compensation, of cause and effect, the moral and spiritual laws that operate with mathematical certainty, are forgotten.

Each time, Hollywood views the wild course of a Sharon Kimm through rosy glasses, confident that disaster somehow will be avoided. Hoping honestly that it will be and yet—if it is not—accepting it with the modern sense of drama, that makes whatever is stimulating and real and new a thing to be enjoyed. After all, no play behind the footlights could be so absorbing as the play of life.

But each time the blow, when it falls, cuts through the hopefulness like the treacherous stab of a knife in the sunshine of a spring morning.

So it was that Sharon Kimm until the very moment of the crash, could go on dancing in her Fool's Paradise, enchanted with herself and with a world that had poured its riches into her lap. While, all the time, behind her stretched the preparations, the causes, the indulgences which had written her fate, the acts by which she had made certain her own undoing.

CHAPTER XXVI

AFTERWARDS, Sharon Kimm was always to remember the velvet beauty of that morning.

The sweet peas were in bloom about the tennis-court, a wall built by the fairies of scented pink and white and mauve blossoms. The lawns were fresh from the night's fog. The water in the swimming-pool was a sheet of silver with gilded edges.

Paradise lay peacefully quiet except for the busy bird-talk in the pepper-trees.

The butler answered the telephone in the small downstairs hall when it rang at a quarter to nine. He answered it a little indignantly. He did not consider it good form for a telephone to ring before nine in the morning. And his indignation increased when the voice at the other end of the wire insisted brusquely upon speaking to Miss Kimm.

"But Miss Kimm is not up," the butler protested. "I cannot call her when she is not up. It is not allowed."

In the end he buzzed for Joan Stillman. Joan answered on her extension, quiet and businesslike. When she hung up the receiver she was white and her lips had a pinched look. She went up the staircase, that only a few nights before had seen such unparalleled grandeur, and knocked on the door of Sharon's bedroom.

Mina opened it, startled and angry. But her words died when she saw Joan Stillman.

"Is Miss Kimm asleep?" asked the secretary, making a visible effort to speak calmly.

"Of course she's asleep," said Mina, wondering at the strangeness of Miss Stillman's face and voice. "She didn't get in until three this morning. A dinner at the bride's—if you can tie that. And I guess she had a few too many cocktails, toasting the newly-weds—not enough to be drunk. I never saw Miss Kimm drunk yet. But enough to make her want to sleep good this morning all right."

"I shall have to wake her," said Joan Stillman.

"Oh, no!" Mina made a move to close the door. "Oh, no! She said sure not to wake her for anything. She don't have to work today. She'll kill me sure."

Joan's lips set grimly. "I'm sorry, Mina," she said, "but it'll have to be done. I'll take the responsibility."

She went into the bedroom and pulled up the shades, sweeping back the frothy curtains so that the sunlight filled the room. For a moment she stood by the bed, looking down at the girl who slept there. Joan Stillman felt that now she looked upon the real Sharon Kimm, the Sharon whom Mickey Reid and Lucia so loved. The sweetness, the simplicity, the undeveloped contours of the little face, affected her strongly. It was as if a mask had fallen and there was revealed the face of a very young girl, marked somewhat by self-indulgence and vanity, but showing, nevertheless, its common origin and its innate purity and strength.

Under Joan's stare the lashes fluttered. "What time is it?" said Sharon sleepily. "It can't be time to get up yet. I'm dead."

Joan Stillman touched her hand. "Dear, I'm sorry,

It's only nine o'clock. But they've called up from the bank and I'm afraid you'll have to get up and go down there right away."

Sharon's eyes sprang open. "The bank? Oh, Joan, did you wake me up for that? What a goose you are! Go away this instant. I won't get up."

"I'm afraid you'll have to," said Joan Stillman again. "It's very important. You promised me last week you'd go in and see about it. And then you said you had, when you hadn't at all. If you don't go at once, I won't be responsible for what happens. But I think we're pretty apt to get moved out of here, bag and baggage."

Sharon got up then, silent and sullen, her eyes narrowed so that only a pale green came from between the dark thick lashes. In spite of Joan's pleas for haste, Mina had to have half an hour to get her ready for breakfast.

Joan watched, her heart beating fast. She had some idea what that day might hold for Sharon Kimm, and it seemed astonishing that Sharon could whistle as she splashed in the sunken tub. Joan did not know that Sharon always whistled to keep up her courage. Sharon hadn't whistled much since Joan knew her.

When she came from the bathroom, in tight-fitting ivory pajamas and scarlet satin slippers over cobwebby black socks, Joan sat down beside her at the little table in the window, while Mina brought her a grapefruit and coffee.

If she had ever prayed, Joan prayed now that she might make Sharon understand what she faced in the day ahead, what danger threatened. She prayed for

words that would break through the cloying beauty of the room, the enervating luxury, the false sense of security, and reach the little figure so impudently disdainful of the storm brewing about her head.

In the most direct way, that there might be no loophole and no misunderstanding, she explained to Sharon Kimm the pass to which things had come. It was no warning. It was a plain setting forth of facts.

She knew Sharon Kimm's ignorance of business terms and methods, of the first principles upon which transactions are conducted. Legal phrases and procedure were a sealed book to Sharon. To Joan, a lawyer's daughter, it seemed impossible that a girl could arrive at such a capacity to earn money with so small a knowledge of affairs.

Therefore she spoke as she might have spoken to a child, stating things in order, with simple explanation.

The overdue payments on the contract under which she was buying Paradise.

The check held by Wong Li, the Chinese merchant.

The suits about to be filed by the firm that had decorated the house, by Marie of the select shop on the Boulevard, and by a firm of jewelers who had supplied her with some diamond shoe-buckles.

The intention of the agency to take back one of her cars.

The tremendous bills for the birthday ball, as yet unpaid, and the action likely to be taken regarding them if it became known she had been forced to give up Paradise.

The meagerness of her bank account, the paltriness of her assets, in proportion to the debts that menaced

her. Realized, they would be only sufficient to pay her income tax, which must be met no matter what happened.

Something in the quiet voice, the pain and fear upon the fine face of the girl, who was usually so self-possessed and so unafraid, penetrated Sharon Kimm's heart.

Her hand began to shake so that she was obliged to put down the dainty fruit spoon.

Overnight the crash had come—come in the beauty of a summer morning, with the broad acres of Paradise stretching at her feet more desirable than they had ever been.

She sensed it and trembled, but of its magnitude, its finality, she had no conception.

It took the events of that day to show her at last the sands upon which she had built her house.

CHAPTER XXVII

THAT was the way the day began for Sharon, the day which was to end with the changing of her life. And it progressed through a series of horrors, piling one up on another with the mounting menace of Greek tragedy.

First there was the session at the bank.

They were waiting for her when she arrived. The president of the bank with the face of a surgeon who uses the knife only because he must. That colorless, cold little man Johnson. In the stuffy office, with its mahogany furniture and its cold floor.

She was all in soft white, a white fur across her slim shoulders, a small black hat pulled down over her eyes, a black swagger-stick in her hand. But she saw instantly that Johnson was unresponsive to her loveliness. How she hated him! How she hated people who looked at her like that, calmly appraising her! Judging her. Didn't he know who she was? It aroused her to a murderous fury. She'd show him! The upstart! She'd make him grovel, at any cost.

She sat there, her knees crossed, so that her little white-shod feet and her famous ankles were visible to Johnson. But they did not move him. He thought her insolent, and he wondered chiefly what those shoes and stockings had cost. As much as his month's grocery bill probably. He realized dimly that her feet were a

different affair altogether from those of Mrs. Johnson and he thanked God for it.

This girl looked to Johnson like a courtesan, and he didn't propose to be bamboozled by her grand airs. No, sir! A dried-up little man with a narrow mind habitually connecting beauty and sin. A most unfavorable man for Sharon Kimm to deal with.

The president had been sincere when he said that he liked Sharon Kimm. There was pity in his soul for her. Therefore he explained the matter in hand with all the courtesy at his command. Even then it was a bad matter.

"But you can't take my house away from me," said Sharon Kimm arrogantly, and she shot a defiant glance at Johnson. "It's mine. I've just succeeded in making it fit to live in. It was an utter horror when I bought it. I've spent a great deal of money on it."

"I'm afraid you did that at your own risk," the president said gently. "I tried to explain that to you before you started. When you buy a house on contract you have no title to that house until the final payment is made."

His shrewd eyes pleaded with her to be tactful, not to antagonize Johnson. But it had been a long time since Sharon Kimm had needed to be tactful. It was always the other fellow who was tactful with her. And it was plain from the first that there was no common ground to be found for her and Johnson.

"You missed your last payment," said Johnson through thin lips. "Now you've missed this one. It's ten days overdue. I gave you plenty of warning. Do you understand the nature of the contract under which

you bought that house? So much down—payments every thirty days—and if the payments aren't met, the house reverts to me. Are you prepared to meet those payments?"

Sharon began to pale before the relentless quality of his voice. It was long since any one had spoken to her like that. Visions of bill-collectors, who had tormented her mother in the little house by the railroad tracks, came before her eyes. She wanted to trample upon this insulting man. But she fought down her rage.

"Will you give me a little time?" she said haughtily. "I didn't quite realize the situation. I've been extremely busy and I must have overlooked those payments."

"I'll give you twenty-four hours," said Johnson. "I've given you time enough before—plenty of it. You've never been on time with anything yet. I notice you have money to spend for other things. The house was plenty good enough like it was. Mrs. Johnson and I were suited with it, anyway, and we're just as good as anybody else. Better than some. If you'd paid for it before you went to making it look like a house of sin, you'd be a sight better off. And I don't propose to wait for my money while you give parties for a lot of actors and actresses. No, sir! I worked hard for my money. I slaved and scrimped and so did Mrs. Johnson.

"Twenty-four hours, then I want my house or my money."

From the bank she drove straight to the Chinese shop on one of the narrow side streets of Chinatown. She went there because Joan told her she might per-

suade Wong Li not to sue. She had not been in his shop for some time. Lately, he had brought things to Paradise for her to see. But it was just as it had been when she first saw it.

There was a faint music from the painted glasses that hung in the doorways, tinkling with every breath of wind. She liked the fragrance that met her entrance, burning Oriental incense, mingled with the odor of carved woods and ancient silks and that indescribable smell of Chinatown itself.

Cluttered and jammed was that small shop where Sharon waited nervously. Shoving each other for space stood a choice teakwood cabinet, and a common bamboo table covered with matting. In the glass show-cases, jumbled together, were rare Chinese porcelains and the cheapest of Chinese teacups.

Wong Li came forward to meet her, his yellow face wrinkled like fine kid in a welcoming smile. He moved with much dignity as befitted a worthy citizen and a rich merchant.

When he saw that the lady was Sharon Kimm, white and elegant in the perpetual dusk of his shop, he stopped smiling. His black eyes looked upon her calmly but without favor. The look stung her like a lash. It was harder to bear than Johnson's cold and disapproving stare.

"How do, Miss Kimm?" he said.

"Oh, hello, Wong!" said Sharon Kimm, leaning upon her swagger-stick. "I came to see you about that check."

He did not help her. Humiliation sent a deep scarlet to her cheeks.

"If you hold it for a few days, you will get your money. You must have known that. I'm surprised that you thought of such a thing as bringing a suit."

"Why you give me check?" asked the Chinaman quietly. "I no ask check. That check no good. I not like do business that way, Miss Kimm. You tell Wong lie. You say, Wong, I got money in the bank. I believe you. Why you not say, Wong, I got no money today. You keep him tapestly for me—little while. Bime-by I got money. I keep him. Velly bad tell lies in business. Velly bad not be honest in business. I make him lule when I get bad check, I sue. Maybe next time man not give bad check. Much better. I velly honest man, Miss Kimm. You not honest. Women not much honest like men in business. I kind man, too. I velly solly for you. You go now. I wait—two, maybe three days. I give you chance. Good-by, Miss Kimm."

He shuffled off. She could hear the soft pad-pad of his slippers upon the uncarpeted floor. And she could only stand there, strangled by humiliation and yet longing to pour forth a thousand unformed utterances in her own defense.

That drove her to the conference with Sam Hirtfeltz at the studio which dealt her a final staggering blow.

Before, she had been angry, chagrined, her ego fighting like a rat in a corner against such treatment.

But Sam Hirtfeltz brought her face to face with fear.

She told her story with a pretty shrug, and a laughing admission of guilt. As a spoiled child might con-

fess a misdeed, trying at the same time to avoid punishment. She had been extravagant. She would have to do better. She just couldn't understand business details and figures made her head ache. In the future she'd follow his advice.

Halfway through the recital she stopped to light a cigarette, in her long jeweled holder, and puffed the smoke with the ease of a great lady. Her air was that it was all trivial and absurd and that she had been guilty only of those little extravagances to which all women of fashion are prone—too many new gowns, a diamond bracelet or so, a fur coat she didn't really need.

Sam Hirtfeltz's face had been pink when she came in. She had put that down to a conference with William Dvorak. Sam always grew pink when he and Bill conferred.

Slowly, as she talked, the painful red began to creep up his neck and to dye his ears, and finally to suffuse his very eyeballs with embarrassment. He began to sweat, too, profusely, and to wriggle in his chair. It seemed to Sharon that he might burst into tears at any moment. She felt quite sorry for him.

But it never occurred to her that he would refuse her request. She knew his reputation about money matters—a reputation so oddly incongruous with the rest of his character. But even that gave her no warning. Sharon Kimm had become adept at closing her eyes to disagreeable things.

He did refuse. Stammering, but with a quality of steel that brought Sharon up aquiver, as a barrier brings a nervous horse to a trembling stand.

"But, Sharon," he said, "just you wait a minute. Why should I lend to you all that money? Don't I pay you a good salary? Don't I pay you a salary any girl would be glad to live on—more than the president gets? Why should you get yourself in debt like that?"

"I don't want you to lend it to me," said Sharon, her chin in the air. "I merely asked you to advance it to me."

"Advance it to you? On what should I advance you all that money?"

"On my salary, of course."

"Sharon, you talk childish. Business isn't so good lately that I can lend you in advance a whole year's salary. We got a slump on, I can tell you. Most everything is getting cut, not advanced. You don't have an idea about the value of money, Sharon. You talk like a thousand dollars was a nickel. A thousand dollars even is a lot of money."

She threatened him then, panic rising in her breast. It would hurt her as a star to have a lot of stuff in the papers. It wouldn't do the Hirt company any good to have her sued for a lot of bills. Scandal never did anybody any good and the Hirt lot had been struck with appalling frequency.

Her threats moved him. He squirmed. But Sharon Kimm was to learn then, what a great many men in the motion-picture business had learned before to the blighting of their hopes. Gentle and visionary as he was, handicapped in social intercourse by the memory of his downtrodden youth, Sam Hirtfeltz was a rock when it came to money. A financial wizard, manipulating all sorts of profitable deals on Wall Street, con-

trolling the fluctuations of public opinion and of the money-market to the advantage of the Hirt corporation, he felt in money the one solid thing in his universe. Even Bill Dvorak could not shake him from a stand in matters connected with money.

He deplored the damage to his property that Sharon Kimm had wrought. If he had been more used to handling people, less shy with women, he might have saved her from it. He had warned her. Over and over he had rebuked her extravagance, begged her to curtail her way of living, so far in excess of his own. But he had had no true perception of the situation. It was inconceivable to him that a sane person could do what Sharon Kimm had done.

He had none of the Babylonian complex that ruled William Dvorak and had gradually come to control Sharon Kimm. Money was to him a force to be harnessed and driven, not a commodity with which to buy things.

He was sorry for Sharon because he saw the fear come up and grip her by the throat. The fact that she had brought the trouble upon herself didn't make it any easier to bear. Sam Hirtfeltz knew that there is nothing so terrible as the sufferings we bring upon ourselves.

But he could do nothing for her. If she were damaged beyond repair in the public eye by her financial crash—that was too bad. It would probably mean some financial loss to him. But her salary was enormous. Her pictures were slipping. She had touched the crest and, like all stars whose popularity is built upon personal lure, she would hold only a certain percentage of

her fans. If she came out badly messed up, she would have to be replaced, as she herself had replaced Ruby.

In the end, she pleaded. But Sam Hirtfeltz didn't seem to be moved by anything but the thought of lending her money.

"You should go to see my lawyer," he said at last, remembering that Lena was fond of this girl, had seen something noble in her. "Maybe he can find you a way out. I'll call him up and tell him you're coming, and he should do his best for you. He's a smart lawyer and I always say when you're in trouble you should see a smart lawyer. You take that girl—your secretary—and go see him. Then you do what he tells you you should do."

But it was the talk with the lawyer that closed every avenue of escape—save one.

He was a man of middle age who clung, in attire, to youth. He was foppishly dressed, with a pink carnation in the buttonhole of his pale-gray coat. Under his close-cropped mustache, his mouth had a slightly cynical, slightly sensuous smile. Any Follies girl will tell you the type.

It was plain to be seen that he appreciated the charm of the slim and distinguished lady in white. He stared with eyes that bulged a trifle upon the picture she made against the dark walls of his private office. The girl in businesslike blue serge with her was an excellent foil.

Joan Stillman was contrasting the luxury of this place with the law offices remembered from her own dear past—dignified, still offices, filled with law books and displaying pictures of Supreme Justices long since gone to face the final judge. There were no law

books here, though Joan caught a glimpse of the latest risqué novel on the antique side table. No pictures of sober mode—only a few autographed photographs of famous motion-picture stars ornamented the walls. Therefore it was a surprise to her to discover the decisive legal mind behind this frivolous surface.

After the first compliments, which the lawyer flattered himself he knew how to pay with as much aplomb as the next man, after a preliminary skirmish of gossip and laughter, during which he and Sharon looked into each other's eyes, they plunged into the business in hand.

Sharon's heart had begun to beat with hope under that look. She was aware that here was a man who could be moved by such a woman as she. No dried-up Puritan like Johnson, no shy and devoted husband like Sam Hirtfeltz.

But for the fourth time in that endless day, she was to discover the change that comes over men when they discuss money.

How different every one became as soon as it was money!

She found herself repeating that over and over, as Joan and the lawyer talked, making notes on paper and adding up columns of figures. But she did not think of much else, nor follow their words. She was tired. Her head had begun to ache. Her throat throbbed. Only a sheer effort of will that simply would not recognize disaster, held back the horrible thoughts which menaced her.

Facts. They mentioned facts continually. It didn't seem to matter now that she was Sharon Kimm. The

lawyer had apparently forgotten her, engrossed in the accounting Joan gave him.

An overwhelming tide of misery swept her back again to the days of little Sharon Kimm, who had been ordered off the Savage lot by a jealous woman. And she had to fight that ghost of the past with all her strength.

When the lawyer glanced at her again, his eyes were void of the admiration that had greeted her entrance. He was only a high-priced lawyer looking at a client to whom he could advise nothing but bankruptcy. He did advise it. Joan Stillman's head sank, but Sharon Kimm continued to look at him with a bright hard defiance.

It was a thing he hated to do. But he had talked with Sam Hirtfeltz and with William Dvorak and to their information he now added the facts given him by this capable secretary, who obviously had tried for months to stem the tide of insane extravagance. A fine example of feminine loyalty, that girl. If she lost her job with Sharon Kimm he would offer her one as his own secretary.

"Well," he said briskly, "I think our only way out of this is bankruptcy. In that way, you'll be able to settle your debts for a few cents on the dollar and you'll start fresh with your salary intact. There are people who regard bankruptcy as merely an unscrupulous method of getting around one's creditors, but personally, since it's legal, I don't see any reason why we shouldn't use it, do you?"

"And, my dear young lady, if you don't go into bankruptcy, you'll have to face months and months of the most rigid economy in order to pay off your debts

in full. I assure you, you won't have a penny you can call your own. It's difficult enough for you as it is, because of course you'll have to lose your house and your cars and sell your jewels to pay your income tax. There's no way in which we can get around that.

"Unless of course, you have some—personal friend who would be willing to make you a loan large enough to pay all your obligations."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE gorgeous cabriolet purred under the awning at the side door of Paradise. Its lights hit a bright path into the darkness. The gold-and-crystal lamps within revealed its silken loveliness.

Miss Kimm was working that night.

The liveried footman, as he sprang to open the car door, thought Miss Kimm walked as if she were very tired. It worried him. All her servants adored Sharon Kimm. Besides, the footman thoroughly disapproved of this night-work. Usually, however, when there was a night call, Miss Kimm slept during the day, only ordering the car for some shopping in the late afternoon.

Today she had been up at nine and the day had been a disagreeable one for the chauffeur and footman. The footman turned up his nose at the recollection. The bank—a place Miss Kimm usually ignored. Chinatown. Main Street, in a block lined with pawn-shops and wholesale meat-markets, neither of which could possibly interest Miss Kimm. The most crowded of downtown sections. No wonder she was tired and her little feet dragged upon the brick terrace.

As he mounted to his place beside the chauffeur, he noticed that when she had sunk down upon the orchid silk cushions, she leaned forward, and gazed back through the French windows into the low-lighted draw-

ing-room. As they started she continued to peer out at the rolling lawns, the dim pergolas, the shimmer of water from the fountain.

As long as she could see it, she looked back at the great stately house upon the hill, that was like the dream castle of an Italian princess. Her face had the look of one who is trying to impress something upon her brain, something beloved and precious.

After all, it was the only idea of heaven her mother had ever given her—this that they were trying to take away from her. As a curve of the Boulevard shut it from view, she still saw it beneath her closed eyelids.

It was the highest thing she could conceive, the farthest flight of aspiration.

It was what all humanity was seeking, its own poor inadequate conception of heaven. Perhaps other girls, with other mothers, had different conceptions. Feathered angels with tin harps. Respectability. Responsibility. Or the harmony of desire overcome and thoughts rendered pure and peaceful.

But Sharon Kimm had never been taught to seek peace. There had been nothing in her life to show her the value of that inner happiness which alone satisfies. She had only been taught to desire things, things that moth and rust doth corrupt.

This—this—this all about her in the scented gorgeousness of the car. This was the heaven that had been pointed out to her, held before her, in those days when she and her mother walked the streets and stared into shop windows.

Her mother had been so beautiful. What good had it done her? What had she wrested from life that she

really wanted? Sharon felt that with all her mother's beauty, the lack of things to give it setting, the lack of background, the lack of the power that only money can give, had made her the prey of men's passion. Bitterly enough, she felt that her mother had died of a sort of unrequited desire for these very things. Luxury. Ease. Beauty. Possessions. Homage.

It was a good many years before Sharon came to see that it was the desire for those things and not the lack of them that had killed Rose Kimm.

Well, there had been the movies for her daughter. In no other way could so great a miracle have been accomplished. She had got into heaven. Now they were threatening to cast her forth. But they shouldn't do it.

Debt. Debt. Debt.

She put her hands over her eyes, shrinking together in her costly clothes. The little fear had grown until it shook her whole body and with it had come a thousand demons to torment and harry her. The day had been too much for her. She felt as if she had been sailing up a steep hill at sixty miles an hour—seventy—eighty miles an hour, and had suddenly crashed over a precipice at the top. Now she hung suspended over the depths below—suspended by the merest thread. One day! It was almost laughable. And yet she began to see that behind this day stretched many days, all preparing for its misery.

And of course she had been called for work tonight. It never made any difference how tired, how miserable, how desperately ill you felt. You must work. The camera waited for no man. Her body ached in every

limb. It seemed to her a century since she had awakened in the morning sunshine to find Joan standing by her bed.

It had seemed to her that she could never dress, prepare for work. Her head was swimming with burning thoughts, like pinwheels on the Fourth of July. But she put on her make-up over a rigid face, stamped with an expression that frightened Mina. She spent the usual three quarters of an hour, carefully beading each eyelash, though her hands trembled so that she kept spilling the hot cosmetic. She steadied her fingers to outline that famous pouting mouth of hers with dark-red lip-rouge.

She could eat no dinner, though Mina and Joan hovered over her. But before she went out to the waiting car, she walked slowly through the house, touching now and then some particular treasure.

Things had closed in on her too quickly. That was Hollywood—that swiftness like a bolt of lightning from the blue. And she had been like England before August, 1914. The thing simply couldn't happen. She had laughed aside every warning because it was impossible. And now, like England, she must pay with her heart's blood for her incredulity.

She had crashed through the thin ice—ice that looked so safe and smooth—and the weeds and slimy things and the foul waters beneath had taken her. She felt them closing over her head.

She leaned back against the silken cushions, fighting for self-control. She was physically exhausted, and there seemed to be things with her in the car that had no business there. Newspaper headlines began to

scream at her and she shrank cowering. How well she could see them—she had seen so many others! What had she done? What had she done that this should have come upon her? She hadn't meant harm to any one.

The whole thing was that she must have money. That was the only solution. A great deal of money. Otherwise all that she idolized would be swept away. Humiliation greater than she could bear would descend upon her.

That word the lawyer had used so often.

Bankruptcy.

Bankruptcy.

It was one of the few unpardonable sins, in Hollywood. It was worse than shameful and dishonorable. It was unsporting.

Foreclosed mortgages. That was silly. Much too silly. It was only in the Wolf melodramas that they foreclosed mortgages. These people all talked about giving up Paradise as though it were the simplest thing in the world to do. Did they realize how beautiful it was? Did they realize that all her heart and soul had gone into it? How could she live now without it? How could she breathe in any other atmosphere? They just didn't understand, that was all.

Competition was keen in Hollywood. There were so very many great ones there. But she had bribed society. She had bought favor and popularity. With her parties and her patronage and her wines and her trips to Europe and her saddle-horses and her swimming-pool and her Rolls-Royce. She could demand homage with that at her back. Stripped of all those

things, she became once more little Sharon Kimm who had worked in a laundry. She couldn't be sure of herself.

The gay crowd—would they come when she was a bankrupt? Would all the clever and amusing and well-dressed people who flocked to Paradise on a Sunday afternoon visit her when she lived in a meaner place? Would all her admiring court still pay homage when she had been forced to abdicate her throne? She knew well enough that they would not.

The awful thing was that she felt utterly alone in this crisis. On the night of her birthday party she had displayed more friends than any woman in Hollywood. They had catered to her whims, laughed at her feeblest joke, yes-ed her every word. Now there wasn't one of them that counted.

They had used her, that was all. Why not? If they got what they wanted out of her, she had taken what she wanted from them. What she still wanted. What would she do without that murmur of admiration, that continual applause? And when this thing became known, the whispering chorus would go the way of all light things, scattered by the first blast of adversity.

In a flash, while her soul was naked and quivering, stripped of the pretenses in which she had wrapped it from truth and the strengthening winds of criticism, she saw them all for what they were, and she did not blame them. They had always existed, the hangers-on, the sycophants, the flies about the honey-pot. But they had become a habit to her, as whisky has become a habit to the drunkard.

What about the great people she had met as equals?

She would be laughed at, pitied, talked over everywhere.

Her tired brain came back around the circle. Paradise was hers. Hers. Bills. Always bills. Bills for things people had begged her to buy. Marie—hadn't she, from the first to the very last, flung irresistible things before her eyes? Hadn't she always ignored Sharon's protests?

Once, not very long ago, Sharon had said to her, "I simply can't afford that, Marie. I can't pay that price for a sport-wrap. It's outrageous." Marie had laughed and put the coat across her arm. "Pay when you feel like it, my dear. I want you to have it." Even then, Sharon had flung it back on a chair and left it. But when she got home that afternoon, the wrap was there. And that very cloak was on the bill for which Marie was going to sue.

Sharon Kimm gave a bitter little laugh. "Pay when you feel like it." Bah! Everybody said that. How eager they were to get interviews with her! How they pestered for a chance to sell her things! Photographers who wanted to take her pictures. Real-estate agents. Automobile salesmen, who left her cars on the smallest payment down. All, all alike. The whole gang of them had concentrated on her, urging her to buy—buy—buy.

A moan shook her. She knew her Hollywood. They wouldn't mean to be unkind. But how they loved to see a great one fall—the rank and file of them! How, in the hidden recesses of hearts consumed with envy and jealousy, they delighted in the crash of a Sharon Kimm, who had lorded it over them!

She had made enemies. They would gloat and laugh.

The people who had known her humble beginnings and had forgotten them in the dazzle of her success—they would remember now. She knew the tongues of Hollywood's gossips—the dirt-dishers.

Well, had she bothered much to be kind or thoughtful when she was up? She wished she hadn't asked Mildred Rideout to her birthday party. She had done it only that Mildred Rideout might see and be confounded. Revenge had been her only motive. And she knew how unhappy Mildred had been. She could hardly expect mercy from Mildred Rideout now.

Bankrupt? Cheat? Worse—fool. Vainglorious fool. She could never hold up her head again. Only that morning there had been a story in the paper of a man who shot himself because he faced bankruptcy. He preferred death to carrying on in the eyes of men who had trusted him and whom he had cheated of their dues. Many men had used the pistol to end disasters less terrible, less public, than hers. Men, strong men, killed themselves in such plights. Even women did, sometimes, as her own mother had done.

But Sharon Kimm did not want to die. The thought buried her head on her knees and she shivered like a frightened child. She wanted to live. Everything was hers. Fame. Fortune. Beauty. How many women, faced with the possibility of losing all that, would stop at any way out?

She was a woman. There were always other ways—easier ways—for a woman.

And she had not the courage to face the thing. Her life these last years had not bred courage. It had softened her. Self-indulgence had weakened her will,

shaken her stand on her principles. Vanity had corroded her moral fiber. Many things seemed possible, even natural, that a year ago would have horrified her.

What had the lawyer said, "Unless, of course, you have some—personal friend, who would be willing to make you a loan——"

Well, had she?

Mickey and Lucia were the only two friends she had in the world, and they didn't care for money. And money was the only important thing now. It hurt to think of Mickey. But she had driven him away for good. What a despicable thing she was! What an insult, sending him away that night with Dvorak! She couldn't crawl back to him, even though she knew that she loved him more than she would ever love anything—except herself. Besides, he didn't have any money. He couldn't help her.

Stanley Craig didn't have any money. Like Sharon, he spent it before he got it. Besides—Sharon's lips curled—she knew the end of things had come between her and Pepper with Pepper's amazing marriage. Oh, they would be friendly, outwardly! But Pepper didn't want to be reminded of her former servitude. Oddly enough, they both discovered that there was no foundation to their intimacy, no love, no respect on either side. Moreover, she was a wise girl, Pepper O'Malley Craig. What couldn't be avoided she would bear with a grin, but there was no use in sitting in a draft. She didn't intend her husband should see any more of Sharon Kimm than could be helped.

There was only one other person and at last Sharon faced the thought of him squarely. William Dvorak

had more money than he knew what to do with. "A personal friend who would be willing to make you such a loan—" Dvorak would be willing. Her troubles would all melt away at a few words from him. Why should she sit here, buffeted this way and that by such terrors as bankruptcy and humiliation and death?

William Dvorak loved her. She understood fully the nature of his love. It was not a love to give without demanding in return. It was still an armed battle between them.

Oh, if only she had listened to Joan and Lucia, long ago! Why hadn't she? She had been insane with pride and arrogance. It was all too late now. That fatal birthday ball! It had precipitated the avalanche. It had been the final mistake, betraying her into the hands of her enemies. There had been no steady decline in her case. The very rise, every step of it, taken as she had taken it, had been part of the ultimate, inevitable fall. Day by day, while she reared the glittering structure, the undermining had been going on.

The swiftness of it was like the unexpected defeat of a world's champion, stepping into the ring with the glory of his title and the perfection of his body at their height, only to be dragged out mere seconds later, a beaten has-been.

Somebody passing in another car laughed loudly.

It cut through Sharon Kimm's growing panic. For it had become panic, hysterical, wild panic. She swayed from side to side and her sobs came in racking gasps. Tears splashed down on the orchid silk, making ugly stains.

To be laughed at. The one thing in the world she could not bear.

Well, she wouldn't bear it! It wasn't pretty, it wasn't heroic, but she must save her face at any cost. The ego-imp in her mind still ruled, scampering about frantically, whimpering to be clothed, sheltered, somehow.

Vanity had conquered her. Vanity, the slave, had become her merciless master. Vanity, a poisonous weed, had choked out the blossoms that might have sprung in her heart. Vanity had distorted her vision until she saw herself as the center of the universe and other things only as they revolved about her.

There was nothing left of six-year-old Sharon Kimm who had scratched the eyes of a young man in a blue suit because of the way he looked at her mother—nor of a flaming Sharon Kimm who had long avoided the easy kisses of Hollywood. Now anything was better than facing the world as a ridiculous bankrupt. Men shot themselves, did they? Well, she was a woman. A beautiful woman.

Her eyes almost blank, Sharon Kimm reached for the speaking-tube.

There was a telephone just inside the door of one of those untidy, badly lighted drug stores on Hollywood Boulevard, near the tunnel and almost into Los Angeles.

Steadily, coldly, Sharon Kimm gave a number.

The bell startled William Dvorak.

He had been sitting before the full-length painting of Sharon Kimm in his office. He had grown into the habit of sitting there, at night, looking at the fleshless

Sharon. His expression as he sat gazing at it was not nice. But there was something, after all, rather pathetic about it. No doubt Sharon Kimm was *his* highest conception of heaven.

The smile of anticipation of his stern lips said something like that as he hung up the receiver.

He pushed a button and the Japanese chauffeur appeared. He was a privileged chauffeur. It was necessary for him to be.

William Dvorak said, "I shall want the car promptly at midnight. I have to go out to Beverly Hills on important business."

The yellow man bowed silently. He did not even grin until the door swung between him and William Dvorak.

But, as it happened, he had been listening on Agnes's extension—he usually did—and he had some idea of the nature of the appointment at midnight that his master was going to Beverly Hills to keep.

He would have the car ready. He rather admired Sharon Kimm himself.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE Sharon Kimm company was making night scenes in the Plaza.

In bygone days, the Plaza had been the center of the little Spanish town of Los Angeles, City of the Angels. Picturesque it had been, and brilliant, and full of love and laughter, as it throbbed before the adobe walls of the mission church. Señoritas made eyes beneath their mantillas at caballeros in velvet breeches and enormous sombreros. Guitars tinkled. Beautiful horses, beneath silver-mounted saddles, stepped proudly along its streets, arching their satin necks. Orange poppies and creamy yuccas bloomed.

But now it was dirty and drab and filled with Mexicans in overalls, and unshaven men with bleary eyes, and soap-box orators, who drew about them knots of repulsive humanity. Papers and peanut shells littered the sidewalks. The grass, enclosed by a picket fence, was gray and sodden.

In the darkness the little church of the Franciscan Fathers brooded over its forgotten glory. Facing it, the narrow streets and dim lights of Chinatown. Below, the clang of freight-cars, shifting and backing. Opposite, up the hill, the road to Hollywood.

Sharon Kimm's car was parked in one of the narrow side streets that run like spokes into the hub of the Plaza. Sharon herself sat in it alone, cold and white

and silent. She had made her decision. She knew what she was going to do. Only, she dared not think any more, nor listen to the voices that clamored at her closed heart.

The electrical crew were hooking up cables from the motors of the big trucks. Arranging lights. Assistant directors and property men scurried back and forth. Derzhaven, the foreign director they had imported for Sharon, stood at the far curb, shouting orders in a never-before-heard combination of Russian, French, and English.

So it was that no one but Sharon saw the girl cross the Plaza, enter the narrow street, and stop in the shadow of an old building that had once been the merry and wicked haunt of unmentionable women. Now it was a warehouse below and a cheap rooming-house above.

The girl was a slight thing, with short dark hair, and an odd cough that seemed to paralyze her. Unpainted and unlovely, she stood there, her blank eyes seeking in the crowds. As the cough came again, she backed into the corner of the building and flung herself against it for support.

It was then the man spoke to her. Sharon Kimm shuddered at the mere sight of him.

Just then the director called and Sharon Kimm, in a wonderful hat and gown, looking as a young duchess should look, but with death in her heart, walked into the glaring lights to do a "slumming scene" for her next superproduction. The scene did not go well, so that she got back to her car just as the girl came into the light again. It seemed to Sharon that she had come down the narrow staircase.

In her hand she held a dollar bill. Sharon watched her as she went with a catlike gait to the lunch wagon on the corner. The smell of the food nauseated Sharon Kimm. But hunger is of many degrees.

The girl's eyes were not good to see as she grasped the sandwich the waiter in the dirty apron held out to her. She paid for it. With the dollar bill. Then, in a spasm of rage and terror, she flung the loose silver into the gutter and began to trample on it with her thin worn shoes. Her hand clutched and unclutched against her bosom. As she flung her head back—back—Sharon Kimm saw for the first time in her life the naked look of the woman who has sold herself.

And Sharon saw, too, the vision of her own face, stamped with the look of sisterhood, forever, beyond redemption.

Sisters. She and the girl in the Plaza.

Then she knew. Like a great light the revelation came upon her, tearing the veils from her eyes. False gods, false standards fell away. She had come from the gutter, where a spade was a spade and fancy names could not disguise. No sophistication, no fine word nor fashionable tolerance, no gorgeous settings nor loose modern customs, could alter fundamental facts for the little Sharon Kimm of old, who suddenly cried out within her.

A harlot was a harlot, whether she sold herself for a dollar bill or for Paradise.

Either road she walked, she must go through hell fire. But she knew now which road she could and which road she could not endure. The girl in the Plaza had shown her that.

For whatever else she might be, Sharon Kimm was not a harlot.

The footman, when he opened the door at her command, stood petrified by her look. "Here," she said harshly, "take that and get a taxi. You see that girl over there? Take her to Miss Morgan's and tell Miss Morgan I said to take care of her until morning. Don't look like that. Do as I tell you, you idiot."

There was something in her eyes, as she gave the next order, that made him add as he repeated it to the amazed chauffeur, "And you better step on it, kid. She's got a brain-storm."

Mickey Reid sat on his little back veranda, smoking his pipe and watching the shadows of starlight on the brown hills. A bird in the sycamore that sheltered his hillside bungalow awoke and called twice, sleepily. But all about lay a peaceful silence, broken only by the humming night noises.

Mickey Reid was not peaceful. His mouth was savage and his eyes were angry. Once he clamped his jaws upon an oath and got up and strode back and forth, his pipe in his mouth, his hands crammed into the pockets of his disreputable old bathrobe.

For since the night of Sharon's birthday party when he had ridden home with Dvorak, a conviction had been growing upon him. Tonight it had reached its height. Sharon Kimm belonged to him. She was his woman—his One Woman. He loved her. And she loved him. Yet life was taking her away from him.

Wasn't he playing the part of a coward to let her be taken from him? Wasn't he sitting here while she was

dragged farther and farther into the seething torrent of wild living that had attacked this century? Shouldn't he go to her and, if necessary, take her by the throat and beat her into insensibility, before he allowed her to be taken from him?

She was his, by every right of God and man. Misery kept him company day and night because his mate was not beside him. Well, then, knowing that she loved him, he should go and take his mate, as his ancestors had done before him. Only a weakling would allow pride and such trifling things as money and fame to block the path to his loved one. He knew that her real happiness, perhaps even her salvation, lay with him.

He had tried to be a man and a gentleman. He had fought down his desire when she offered herself to him. He knew it had been the madness of a moment with her. He could not violate the woman he wanted for his wife and the mother of his children. But he could break down, being a man and young and loving and beloved, the ridiculous barriers she had built up.

He would do it. He would go to her now, this very night, in the darkness, and he would make her come with him forever, if he had to bind and carry her away.

He went into his small bedroom and flung off his bathrobe and slippers. Put on his shoes and sweater. His eyes were alight now with fire and his mouth was smiling. This was what he should have done long ago. It was no time to dally with scruples and codes.

Mickey's little house from the front was dark. The bell refused to give out even the smallest tinkle. But the girl beat upon the door with frantic hands.

This beating, to the dark-eyed boy, whom it stopped with his hand upon the door knob, had a desperate appeal. He was prepared to see almost anything when he opened the door. Anything except Sharon Kimm, her eyes black where tears had smudged the cosmetic, and her lips pale where trembling hands had wiped away the rouge.

Wordless with joy, he let her in.

For a long moment she stood there, gazing at the untidy, comfortable, brown room. Its rows and rows of friendly, worn books. Its worn and welcoming chairs. Its glow of coals in the brick fireplace. She turned at last from them and looked at him.

And in all his life, Mickey Reid was never to forget just how Sharon looked then—honest and decent and fine-worn with pain. Like a guilty man who asks only a chance to pay the penalty for his crime.

"It's yours, isn't it, Mickey?" she said whimsically, trying to keep her voice steady and not succeeding very well. "All yours? No mortgages—or anything?"

Mickey could not take his eyes from her face. "It's all mine," he said quietly.

"Could I have—part of it, Mickey?" said the great Sharon Kimm.

"It's always been all yours. I was just—coming to you, to ask you to share it for always. It's not much. But it's where you belong, Sharon. Have you come to think you could be happy here?"

Sharon's eyes opened wide and they were blue as the sea.

"It's going to be a long time before I can be happy, anywhere. Oh, Mickey, will you help me? I've been

bad. I've been rotten. Tonight, for quite a long time I thought heaven was—something different, and that I was going to buy it. Nobody can buy heaven, can they, Mickey? What is it Lucia is always saying out of her funny Bible? "The kingdom of heaven is within you." Is that it? Within you. There isn't anything within me, Mickey, but vanity and lies and stinking pride. And that's all got to be emptied out before I can begin to put heaven in, hasn't it? I'm a—bankrupt, Mickey. Will you—take me in?"

Mickey Reid sobbed once, but he put her in the biggest chair, and put his arms about her, and knelt close. "I'd take you in if you were a murderess—" he said.

"I know," said Sharon softly, "I know, but it's going to be—hell, Mickey. I got myself into it. I took what I wanted. I'm vain and wicked and proud. Now I've got to pay for my fun. I shall hate it. Oh, God, how I shall hate it! It makes me sick to think of it. I shall be bitter and broken and I shall suffer. I shall want it back, all I have to give up. I shall hate you. I shall hate myself. I shall hate saving to pay back everything and shall hate the people who watch me do it most of all. It'll be hell, Mickey. But I'm going to do it. I've got to do it.

"I found out tonight that I have to do it. I can't live if I'm a cheat. I couldn't live if I was a harlot. I'm not different. I thought I was. But I'm just—Sharon Kimm, underneath."

"I love you," said Mickey Reid.

"And I love you."

"There isn't any real hell where love is, Sharon," said Mickey Reid, simply. "Don't you know that?"

Sharon looked back at him with eyes in which lay a terrible knowledge of the bleeding feet with which she must tread the path of her life in the days ahead. Nothing had changed, since she rode through the streets on her way to the Plaza. It was all there—waiting for it. The very fineness of the thing lay in the fact that she did not deceive herself.

And yet her heart sang with a great willingness and with a new hope and with a love that she knew at last could in the end make everything worth while.

And as her lips met Mickey's, she remembered for almost the first time that Rose Kimm had never loved her father.

Agnes, the efficient secretary, came quietly into Mr. Dvorak's private office, with the mail. It was early and of course Mr. Dvorak had not come down yet.

Suddenly she gasped and stood still, gazing with eyes in which understanding dawned slowly and painfully.

There were scraps of stuff upon the floor. And the portrait of Sharon Kimm, the exquisite painting, had been mutilated by long jagged wounds, such wounds as might be made if a man took a riding-crop and attempted to cut the lovely, pictured body to ribbons with its lash.

Wong Li, the Chinese merchant, looked upon the two with a grave smile. The slim, finely built boy, whose dark eyes met his so frankly, and the girl in blue who was somehow younger and softer than he had remembered Sharon Kimm to be.

"All light," said Wong Li. "I give you thlee—four

years pay him back. I tell you. You got other bills, maybe, you got to pay him, too?"

The boy laughed. "Well, now that you mention it," he said gaily, "we have got a few other little bills to pay in the next few years. But we've proportioned them all out—and it can be done. It can be done."

"Well—you give him me tapestly back. Maybe I know museum buy him. Maybe I find so lich man buy him. Not many people like pay so much for tapestly. But I guess I sell him. You got plenty other bills to pay." He chuckled at them as he padded back into the cluttered darkness.

SO that is the story of Sharon Kimm, of Hollywood. But it is not every woman who sees—first—the girl in the Plaza.

THE END

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